L O Y A L.

LOYAL.

A Novel.

"Loyal je serai durant ma vie."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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LOYAL.

CHAPTER I.

GUY LAWRENCE resolved that this state of things should not continue any longer.

It was not fit or becoming, he told himself, that he should be made the sport of a young girl, that he should be encouraged by her one day, and treated with rudeness the next. Many times he asked himself whether he should not leave her for ever, be content to accept her refusal of him, and never speak to her again of his love: but then he remembered how, by her manner on the evening of the picnic, and on the day or two subsequent to it, she had belied her words—how she had seemed as if she did in truth love him; as if she would, but for her shyness, have retracted what she had said to him in a moment of

anger—and again his heart was softened to her, and he felt that he could not separate himself from her or give up hope, while yet there remained a chance that she might still love him.

He would see her again, and again tell her that on her hung all his hopes of future happiness; he would tell her that this time her yea or nay would be final.

He would beseech her to confess the truth, and not let any false pride, or any small desire for revenge, come between them and drive them asunder for ever.

He would tell her how his heart was full of tenderness for her—how it yearned for her; he would tell her how, through these sorrowful years, he had thought of her, and loved her with a love that would not be repressed—it would be hard indeed if she would not listen to him, if she repulsed him, as she did on the balcony.

So the next day, Guy Lawrence went out determined to see Kitty, and to see her alone; for he thought that it might perhaps be some fear of Mrs. Hoare that had made her behave as she had done on the previous day. Moreover, he did not desire to compromise her in his cousin's eyes, so he

wished to see her without anyone's knowledge. With that object in view he found himself, about four o'clock in the afternoon, pacing up and down the streets, close to Grosvenor Square, which commanded a view of the house—waiting until Kitty, with her pupils, should cross over into the square gardens; where, as he had ascertained from his little cousins, they usually spent these hot afternoons. He smiled sardonically at his own folly in walking up and down there, like a love-sick boy in search of his lady-love; but still he stayed on and on, till, when he had nearly given up hope of seeing her that day, and had evidently excited the suspicions of a policeman by his prowling about, he caught sight of the flutter of a white dress just disappearing through the gate, and he arrived there in time to see Kitty and the children vanish among the trees.

He could not stay there peering over the sooty railings in full view of the house, so he walked slowly round and loitered about until he found a stray nursery maid, and prevailed on her to grant him admittance into the square. Once within its sylvan precincts, it was not very difficult to

discover the white cotton dress and little black bonnet that he was seeking.

Kitty was sitting under a tree, apparently intent on a book, and the children were at some distance playing croquet. Her head was bent down, and Guy came round behind her and stood close by her side before she saw him.

"Miss Lorton," he said, holding out his hand. "I have been searching for you."

She looked up, and for a moment her face showed nothing but surprise; but it instantly changed to such passionate anger that Guy drew back startled.

"You here?" she said. "Why do you pursue me—can't you leave me alone, even here?"

"Kitty, what have I done to you, that you should speak to me like this?"

"Done! ask rather what have I done to you, that you are not content to have insulted and humiliated me once? Are you trying to drive me from the only home I have in the world, that you are doing your best to make the only people who are kind to me think ill of me? What possible motive——?"

"Hush, Kitty; spare me these reproaches, which are false and undeserved. Sit down and

listen to me. I have a few words that I must say to you, and you must hear them."

He spoke so quietly and gravely that Kitty, awed into momentary silence and submission, sat down again; and he placed himself by her side.

"I came to you, not to drive you from your present home, but to offer you mine again. You say I insulted you once, you have your revenge now, that I, who think myself proud, come to you again, though you have rejected me once."

She smiled bitterly.

"I know how sore a trial it was for your pride to stoop to ask me to be your wife; I know why you did it—because your conscience taught you you had behaved dishonourably, and it was the only compensation you could make me. But do you think I would accept the love offered to me from a tardily awakened sense of honour—or from pity?"

"I asked you to be my wife, because I loved you, and I dared to hope you might perhaps return my love. I have come again with the same object, and with the same hope; but unless you love me, I will not plead with you to marry me for my sake—

because I love you so, and must be utterly miserable without you—for I should be fearful of my power to make you happy; but Kitty, Kitty, it is because my own love is so unchangeable, so undying, the one and only love of my life, that I find it so hard to believe that you, if you ever loved me as you said you did, can have changed." He paused for a moment, and she interrupted with a scornful little laugh.

"No doubt it is impossible for you to believe that anyone can be so blind as not to love you."

But he went on without heeding her.

"And so I have come to you again, because I have thought that it may be you have rejected me from some small desire for revenge, some unconquerable pride, which forbids you to accept the love of a man who has wounded you—as I once unhappily did. Kitty, I know you so well; I have studied every word, every look of yours. Was I wrong in thinking that on those days—the evening of the picnic, and the two days after—I read in your words, your looks, your manner, that you still loved me a little?"

"Wrong, wrong—utterly wrong," she

cried passionately, drawing away her hands from his, which would have taken them.

"Your very bitterness and hardness to me, the very passion of your answers, makes me think that it is some feeling of offence that actuates you. Tell me, Kitty, have I done anything? Surely, surely, I cannot have hurt you, when all my heart, all my life is so true to you."

Her lip curled, but still she was too proud to accuse him.

"Is it not enough that I have told you once I do not love you?"

"It is true, then? I only ask you for the truth. I was a fool to doubt you, only —only once or twice it seemed to me—ah! well, never mind what it seemed; but while there was a vestige of hope, I would not give you up. Once before we were separated; I was forced to let you misunderstand me, and think I did not love you, when my heart was breaking for you. This time, when no such barrier exists between us, when nothing seals my lips, I am determined that no misunderstanding shall be the cause of our separation. You, and you alone shall speak the word which shall divide us, if we are to be divided; on your head shall be the

blame, if you send me from you, and make two lives desolate that might have been happy, from some unworthy motive of your own. Be true to yourself, Kitty; speak, tell me: is it that you do not love me, or that you are still angry with me, and cannot forgive me?"

She was so sure that he was still trying to deceive her; she was so sure that she held undoubted proofs of his falsehood. Had she not seen him with that woman, looking into her splendid eyes as she had never seen him look before? Had not Colonel Temple said he was to be married to her? Had he not been ashamed to speak of her presence at the Richmond dinner; and conscious of his own guilt, tried to delude Lily and herself about it?

Never for one moment, in the tumult of wounded pride, did she doubt that she was right in her conclusions, or that Guy Lawrence was as utterly false as she thought him; and her anger and passionate indignation against him almost choked her.

"Must I tell you again and again," she cried, starting up, "that I do not love you? Why can't you leave me alone—why do you persecute me like this?"

He looked at her silently; but this time there was something more than sorrow in his face, there was reproach—almost anger. He stood so for a moment, and then he turned away without a word, and left her standing there alone; but he only went a little way, paused, hesitated, then came back to her and spoke very gravely.

"You have said enough, more than enough. It would have been well, perhaps, to have told the truth with less harshness and bitterness; but you have convinced me thoroughly that it *is* the truth, and I shall never speak to you again on this subject—never see you again at all if I can help it." His voice trembled a little, and he paused for a moment. Then he held out his hand.

"We must part for ever; but don't let it be in anger. I will try to forget how you have spoken to me to-day, and remember you only as one whom I have loved—very dearly." But she drew away her hands and held them resolutely behind her, looking at him in the same defiant, scornful way, without answering a word.

"Wont you say 'Good-bye?'"

But not one word came to her white trembling lips, not one momentary sign of soft-

ening changed the passionate anger of her face. Guy, stung to the quick, withdrew the hand he had held out, and went away and left her.

Oh, the bitterness of that parting, the misery and shame and remorse of it, that would come back to her through all the long after years, and haunt her to her dying day! She stood there and watched his receding figure, and stared vacantly at the little spots of light that danced up and down among the shadows, when the breeze stirred the branches of the trees, and tried to think and to remember what she had done, what she had said; but nothing came back to her but the ceaseless echo of his words, "We must part for ever." Yes, for ever; he was gone for ever.

And Guy? It was well, perhaps, for him that the anger in his heart somewhat obliterated the misery and shame; well, perhaps, that he could not remember that he had parted with the girl whom he loved, and lost all hope of winning her for his wife, without recalling, too, how cruelly and remorselessly she had wounded him by the bitterness of her rejection.

He was very angry with her. He

hardened his heart against her, and tried to persuade himself that it was well that he had parted from her for ever; well that he was convinced of his own madness, and could no longer be made the fool of a girl's caprices.

As he strode hastily along the sun-stricken streets, a bright face peered out at him from a brougham-window, a face that seemed more than ever beautiful in contrast with the gloom and anger of the one he had just left. A daintily-gloved hand pulled the check-string, and in a moment Guy Lawrence was leaning over the carriage door, holding the delicate hand in his, and looking into the face of the most beautiful woman in London.

The sight of her was like a draught of champagne to a man who is depressed. Like an exotic, Celia expanded and spread out her leaves in the sunshine; when other people were drooping and panting with the heat, she was in her glory. The fiercest rays of the sun seemed only to lend her new life and gaiety, and to reflect their brightness into her sparkling eyes.

The animal predominated so greatly over the spiritual in her nature, that she was always more than ordinarily influenced by physical sensations. Like a child, she could

not endure the slightest bodily pain; like a child, she was so full of buoyant life and health that when the air was light and the sun was bright, the mere fact of existence was enjoyment to her, and whatever causes for sorrow or disquietude she may have had, she seemed unable to remember them.

Perhaps it was only partly real and partly assumed, this joyousness of manner on this particular day; perhaps she wished to make Guy forget how she had spoken, and how they had parted two nights ago.

"I'm going to have a little drive into the country all by myself. I feel just like a child let out for a holiday. It is such a luxury to get rid of Mrs. Robarts for one afternoon; I've given her leave to go and see some old aunt who's dying, and I couldn't go in the Park alone."

"You will have to be back for the theatre?"

"Of course, but there are still two or three hours."

"Will you let me come with you?"

Celia coloured, hesitated, and then looked up with a charming smile.

"What will people say——?"

"Whatever they please," answered Guy, jumping in and seating himself by her side, as

she gathered up her flowing skirts to make room for him. "Does the man know where to go?"

Then as they rolled along, and Celia sat for a moment silent, with slightly flushed cheeks, he said with a smile:

"'Tis very selfish of me, I know, but I feel in a position to defy the world, and the opinion thereof. I can't imagine a more pleasant beguilement of the hot summer hours than rolling along into the country in a soft-cushioned carriage, with you by my side."

"Are you turning Sybarite?" she answered, smiling.

She could scarcely repress the pleasure which she felt in having him with her, and it showed itself very plainly to Guy.

His heart was sore with grief, his pride had been bitterly wounded; and the flattery of her tender looks, her gentle caressing manner, soothed him more than he would perhaps have cared to confess. Rejected with unnecessary contempt, humiliated by one woman, what man would not turn with pleasure to the lustrous eyes and thrilling voice that woo him and console him with the belief that there is at least one woman who finds him not unworthy of love?

Those few hours spent with Celia poured balm on the wounds that Kitty had so ruthlessly dealt. She saw that he was gloomy and depressed, and setting herself to please him, succeeded passing well. She was a clever woman; she knew when to talk and when to be silent; she knew how to make her silences soft and seductive, and more expressive than words; and how to make her conversation brilliant and amusing. She was very apt at picking up ideas and subjects from the clever people with whom she, being a famous actress, was constantly brought in contact; and she had all the theatrical behind-the-scenes gossip, which is so amusing to an outsider, at her tongue's end; so that when they drew up before her house, after a long drive, and a short stroll in country lanes, and Celia, looking at her little jewelled watch, declared she had only half an hour in which to dine and get to the theatre, Guy could scarcely believe the time had passed so quickly.

He said so, and she looked up with a pleased smile.

"You will come to see me to-night?"

"At the theatre? No; I don't care to see you there. What man would be pleased

to see a woman whom he likes, stared at by hundreds of gaping idiots?"

She looked down half piqued, half glad.

"Then come after the theatre; I'm all alone to-night."

Scarcely waiting for his answer, she left him; and Guy, walking homewards by himself, for the first time in his life compared these two women, the one whom he loved, and the one who loved him, to the disadvantage of the former.

Kitty had been angry, vindictive, and fierce when he had done her the greatest honour that it is possible for a man to do a woman. But Celia, forgetful of the offence he had given her but a short time ago, had been soft and pleasing in her manner, and had, he thought, shown the real nobleness of her disposition in her readiness to forgive.

Guy Lawrence, not above the weakness which makes all men prone to think well of those who so evidently think well of them, began to feel he had partly misjudged Celia: given her credit for all the evil, but not for all the good, which she really possessed, and that under tuition and guidance her character might change, and develop into something really grand and good.

But of Kitty he thought hard things that day, for he could not forgive her her unjust treatment of himself.

Notwithstanding his refusal, Guy did appear in the stalls at the end of the second act of "La Belle Sorcière;" and when the performance was over he went to the stage-door of the theatre, and waited until Celia should issue forth.

For the first time since she had appeared before the public the beautiful actress left the theatre and drove home escorted by a man, and without her ever-watchful chaperone; and people began to talk and to couple her name with Guy Lawrence's, wondering whether he was "going to cut his brother out," or whether "she was going to play the same will-o'-the-wisp sort of game with both of them."

That evening, when Guy bade her good-bye, Celia sat by the piano where he had left her, one hand still unconciously playing the notes of the last song she had sung to him, with a dreamy, languid thoughtfulness on her face, and a wistful tenderness in her drooping eyes.

"'*Dites lui, dites lui.*' Ah, if I could; but he must know—surely he must know."

And then her face dropped on her hands as if to hide the crimson flush that spread over it, even to her forehead.

And Guy strolled on under the quiet stars with those same words ringing in his ears—the refrain of a song which he had never liked until that night, when it had seemed to gain a passionate intensity from the beautiful lips that had uttered it. "*Dites lui que je l'aime, et que je suis belle.*"

CHAPTER II.

THE London season was nearly over; another campaign was almost ended; and society was about to go through the last engagement of its annual civil war—at Goodwood. Many who had gone into the conflict in all the contemptuous haughtiness of strength, with head erect and pennon proudly flying, had come out of it crushed, humbled, wounded to the death—the one vulnerable point of their harness had been found, and they had fallen, pierced through and through, *sans merci*. Others, with no ruder weapons than the lightning glances of their bright, flashing eyes, or the irresistible attack of low-toned winsome tongues, had left the field strewn with their victims, imploring, cursing, writhing, wounded to the heart; while the victors in triumph led their chosen captives to domestic bondage. Reputations had been assailed, rent, and torn in shreds; the innocent had suffered with

the guilty; idle tongues had joined with malicious ones in the slanderous slaughter, and the havoc had been, as usual, terrible. Injustice, tyranny, dishonesty, and fraud had been condoned, and even applauded—because successful. Men had toiled and lied, and bartered honour and conscience for wealth and worldly position. Women had plotted and schemed, and envied and hated one another with all the bitterness and malevolence that only such a rivalry can foster, as they struggled and jostled for coronets and money-bags—the prizes of the season. Honour, love, and truth had dwelt amongst them too; though almost stifled by the pestilential atmosphere, though hidden and well-nigh lost in the unsympathetic crowd, in some places they had taken root too deeply to be eradicated. But now the struggle was almost at an end, and the combatants—even the victorious ones—looked tired, worn, and jaded. The jaunty bearing, the placid smile that masked the wounded spirit torn with abortive hopes, new-born griefs, or bitter, heart-sickening disappointments, could be cast aside in the secrecy of solitude, and fresh strength nurtured to begin the fight anew.

Affairs of all sorts were coming to a crisis; affairs parliamentary, affairs monetary, and above all, affairs matrimonial.

Who would see his lady-love go off to other scenes, and run the risk of "other lips and other hearts telling their tale of love" to her, when he might prevent it?

Doubtless there were many love-scenes being enacted in London on this particular day of which I write, but there was one in which the chief actors were more like combatants than lovers, an *affaire de cœur*, in which two people met to fight *à outrance*. A man and a woman, unequally matched, for the man staked all his heart and soul on his success, and the woman staked—nothing.

"Let me speak to you; I must. You bade me hold my peace, and I have obeyed you. You have told me to be patient, and I have tried; but I cannot any longer; I cannot bear the slights you put upon me. I cannot——"

And Bertie Deverell, pacing up and down the room, paused, not from want of words, but because he was a very coward in the

presence of this woman whom he loved, and he feared to offend her.

Celia, leaning carelessly back among her cushions and lazily fanning herself, watched him with a half smile upon her full, rich lips.

"Poor Bertie, is he so ill-used then? Come and tell me all about it," she said with a little mocking laugh.

He turned angrily, and spoke with more firmness than before.

"I *will* tell you all about it. I have come here for that purpose; to tell you that I am not satisfied with your treatment of me, and that I will not bear it any longer. You have led me on, little by little, to love you so slavishly, so hopelessly, that you have made me a very baby in your hands, and you think me a fool, to be caressed one day and insulted the next. When I complain, you laugh at me—tell me not to be jealous. I have tried to believe in you, trust you, and to think that you could not have been deceiving me all this while; heaven knows how hard I have tried, but I *cannot*."

"*Et puis?*"—with a slight elevation of her eyebrows—still monotonously waving her fan.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, glaring down at her. "Are you a woman or a devil that you mock me and torture me till you drive me nearly mad?"

"Please don't be violent; it is so warm," she answered in a plaintive tone, never flinching from the passionate face so close to her own, never even opening her half-closed eyes.

There was a moment's silence, and then Bertie spoke very quietly; but there was a hard, cold ring in his voice that might have warned her she had driven him very nearly to the extremity of endurance.

"I will have a plain answer to a plain question. Will you marry me? Yes—or no?"

She fixed her eyes full upon him, smiling as if it was impossible for her to repress her amusement.

"And if I say—yes?"

"Then I shall insist on your acknowledgment of our engagement, that I may have a right to protect you, and to prevent your name being sullied by association with any other man's."

"And if I say—no?"

"Then—then I should pour on you the bitterest curses that ever woman heard;

then—O heaven!—I think I could understand how men become murderers—how in one moment of insane passion they are oblivious of everything—and have no mercy, no pity. I think I could almost kill you."

She laughed outright.

"*Dio!* how you rave; you don't do it so badly, but you see I have so much of that on the stage, and they do it better there. Come, I think we've almost had enough of this, though it *is* very amusing. Suppose you sit down like a rational human being, instead of ranting up and down like a wild beast, or a Hamlet, and let us talk comfortably and quietly, if we must talk. For my part I'd rather have a nice little siesta, and wake up cool and refreshed just in time for the theatre."

"Damn the theatre."

"That isn't polite; I don't allow anyone to damn anything in my presence—by-the-bye, you've said a great many things that were far from polite. Do you know I had a great mind to tell the servant to show you out? I think I should, but for the trouble of ringing the bell. It is *such* bad taste to rave and storm."

"Will you oblige me by talking sense?

When you have given me an answer to my question I will rid you of my presence."

Then, changing his mood, he flung himself down by her side, and pressed his hot lips to her cool white hands.

"Oh, Celia, Celia, my love, my darling, tell me you have not meant to deceive me; tell me you care for me, just a little. I do not ask you to love me as I love you—it is such torture, such madness; but only say that you mean to be true to me, and to marry me after all, and I will be content."

"What! even without the conditions you insisted on so forcibly a moment ago? That's fortunate. Bertie, listen to me: it would have been better for you, far better, if you had not forced me to speak again on this subject; as you have, I can only again repeat what I have told you already a hundred times: I will make no promises, no engagement of any sort."

She paused. Bertie had thrown himself on the cushions, and was hiding his face with his hands.

"Long ago you asked me to be your wife, and I told you I was an actress, and it was my ambition to be a famous one; I told you that for the present all my hopes

and thoughts were centred in that one thing, that I had no time to think of wooing or of wedding like other women."

"You told me——"

"Hush!—yes; I told you also that some day I might tire of ambition, and want—what other women want—love and happiness; and then—it might be"—She paused, and her eyes, looking into the distance, seemed to have wandered away into some dreamy vision of the future.

Bertie, hanging on her words as if they were life or death to him, uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Is it to be always like this; am I to be for ever content with these vague, meaningless promises?"

"Promises? I made none, I never shall make any; you are free to come or go, to love or leave me, just as you please. Whatever happens you can never say I have deceived you."

"By heaven! this is too much; you will marry another man, perhaps, and then tell me you have never deceived me; you will destroy my whole life, every hope I have of happiness, and then tell me you have done me no wrong. You have taken care not to

commit yourself to words perhaps, but will you tell me that by intention and design you have not led me to believe, as surely as I believe in anything in heaven or earth, that you loved me, and would one day be my wife—will you tell me——"

"Bertie, I will not hear another word. If you choose to do as I tell you, stay here; if you cannot, leave me."

And she sank back languidly among her pillows, as if the subject had exhausted her. Bertie got up, his face white as death.

"You have driven me a little too far; you think I haven't the power to leave you, but I have; and if I go now I will never look upon your face again."

He went towards the door, moving slowly; looking half stunned and bewildered, as if he had received a sudden blow. She watched him stealthily, and when his hand was on the door, and she saw that he would really go without a word or one backward glance at her, she murmured very low,

"Bertie."

That was enough. In an instant he was by her side, kneeling at her feet, uttering frantic, half articulate expressions of passionate love, reproaching himself for doubt-

ing her, and begging her to forgive him; hardly able to keep back the tears from his bright blue eyes.

For one moment she rested her white hand caressingly on his golden hair.

"You silly boy, why must you quarrel with me?" she said gently.

"I will never quarrel with you, if you will say you love me, Celia."

She bent her head down, and whispered something which brought a radiant smile to the face that was looking up so adoringly into her own—and Bertie Deverell's last effort after freedom and independence was as unsuccessful as any of his former ones—he was in the toils again.

A little while after, he left the house with the light step and buoyant air of a man who has been successful in his mission; but as he walked along the elation of his manner faded slowly. Free from the intoxication of Celia's presence, he was better able to think calmly of what had passed; and though that little tender whisper still lingered softly in his ear, he was fain to confess to himself, reluctantly, that he was no nearer to the attainment of his wishes than he was before.

He no longer believed as blindly in his idol as he had once done. Doubts had been forced upon him; he could not help knowing how willing she was to sacrifice him to her own caprice; how vain, how unscrupulous. And seeing her in this new light, he knew that he had no real hold upon her, no fetter with which to bind her to himself. Alas for him! he had begun to discover that his idol was of the earth—very earthy; that this piece of flesh and blood magnificence before which he bowed himself in such abandonment of worship, had a heart of stone, which all his love could not soften; and that, after the manner of idols, she imposed endless sacrifices upon her adorers.

The alternate fluctuations of hope and despair were beginning to tell upon Bertie. The feverish uncertainty drove him into continual dissipation; he had recourse to stimulants, and tried to find a Lethean draught in the cup of excess. His temper, always variable, was more so than ever now; at one moment he seemed possessed by a wild gaiety, the next by a moody gravity.

As he swung along through the Park, he came face to face with a man who was entering it.

"Hullo, Guy!"

"Bertie! just the man I wanted. I was going to your rooms."

"Anything up?"

"No; I was coming to say good-bye. I'm thinking of going off to-morrow or the day after."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh, anywhere. I must go to Erlesmere for a day to see Humphreys; he's got some steward's work for me to do—leases to sign, and all that—then I shall come through London for my traps, and off to Italy, Switzerland, Norway—anywhere for a little fresh air and a quiet life. Will you come with me?"

"No, thanks; your destination seems to be rather vague. Well, I shall hear from you, I suppose. Good-bye, old fellow!"

But Guy lingered, and there was a wistful look in his worn, anxious face, as his eyes rested on his young brother.

"Is there nothing I can do for you, Bertie—money, or anything—before I go?"

"No, thank you," answered Bertie, hurriedly, swinging his cane and tapping his boot, as if impatient to be gone.

"I wish you'd be off into the country somewhere, young one," said Guy, kindly.

"I know you don't like advice, but you're playing the deuce with yourself by the sort of life you lead; late hours, dissipating and drinking, soon knock a fellow up."

Bertie laughed carelessly, but still with some irritation.

"All right; reserve the rest of your lecture to our next meeting. What's the good of life if one can't enjoy oneself? *You* don't seem to have discovered '*il segreto per esser felice*,' as the song says. By-bye."

And without another word he was gone.

Guy looked after him for a moment, and then turned into the Park, and slowly wended his way across the arid, burnt-up grass, under the dusty, half-withered trees. There was something intensely depressing in the sight of the deserted Ride; the empty chairs, so lately thronged by a brilliant multitude; and though he cared little for gay crowds and fashionable rendezvous, and rejoiced in the solitude, the gloom of the scene added to the melancholy which oppressed him. He quickened his steps, turning into the leafy avenue of Kensington Gardens, and thence over the grass, and throwing himself on a seat under one of the massive old trees which still spread their branches triumph-

antly in the very heart of London, gave himself up to his reflections.

The world seemed to him very dark that day—a terrible chaos in which right was hopelessly, inextricably intermingled with wrong. It was not only that his own lot was a hard one. With the calm of despair, he accepted the certainty of his own misery, present and future; he knew that all love, the love of those two whom he had most cared for, was for ever denied to him. But with the loss of all hope, the old tendency to fatalism revived in him; he acknowledged that it was Kismet; he bowed to the inevitable, and resolved that he would no longer struggle against it. But all that he had hoped to do, or tried to do to help others, had ended in failure, or worse than failure also. He was troubled, sick at heart, disappointed. All his watchfulness, all his solicitude on Bertie's behalf, seemed likely to prove abortive. He was hopeless of convincing him of the folly of his passion for Celia. When he had attempted to prove to him that the only affection of which she was capable was for him, Guy, he had only succeeded in inspiring him with distrust of himself—he had only succeeded in appearing

ungenerous, treacherous, and dishonourable in the eyes of the young brother whom he had tried to serve.

It galled Guy almost beyond endurance to see Bertie frittering away his days in attendance on this actress's caprices, and yet he knew that he was powerless to prevent it, that he had tried all the weapons in his armoury, and failed. And he resolved to go away and leave him. He felt that his presence was a restraint on Bertie, that his brother shewed almost a disinclination for his companionship, and that it would be impossible for him to stay with him, or to follow him, when he should leave town against his will.

"I can't think what he is waiting for," muttered Guy, digging his foot fiercely into the withered grass; "probably until *her* engagement is over, and then he'll follow as a humble retainer in her suite—confound her."

He was savage, desperate, despairing. The brief, careless leave-taking between himself and Bertie had pained him bitterly; had increased the weight of sorrow that already oppressed him; and above and beyond all these real troubles he was worried and distressed about another matter.

Rumour, always busy, yet generally reaching last the ears of those whom it most concerned, had that day taught Guy Lawrence that the world was coupling his name with Celia's, in its usual charitable manner of "thinking no good," and now he was suffering some pangs of conscience; recollecting too late, perhaps, that what he had only meant as a well-deserved retaliation on Celia, and a lesson to Bertie, might have been misconstrued by her as well as by all the rest of the world; recollecting that he was as much bound to behave honourably to her as to other women, and that *his* honour was in jeopardy, and perhaps *her* heart, if she had one.

In his great love for his brother, and in remembrance of the vow he had made always to protect and guard him from every evil, he had desired to save him at any cost from the hopelessness of a love, or from the worse misery of a marriage without love, with a vain, intriguing woman. The means he had employed, the power he had used over her, he, Guy Lawrence, believed that he had been justified in using, hoping thereby to save his brother. But he had only intended to open Bertie's eyes, to let Bertie

see how little Celia cared for him; and on the other hand, to use his influence over her, and beg her to tell his brother the truth. Thus far had he intended to go, but no farther; but little by little he had been driven on, and feeling some real kindliness, some real sympathy awaken in him for this woman, he had overlooked the fact that he might be creating in her mind hopes that could never he realized.

"There's nothing to be done but to go away; there's not much fear she'll break her heart, or that *I* have inspired a *grande passion*," he thought to himself, sardonically. "Not much fear that she or anyone else will regret me long. I'll go away and bury myself and my dead past out of sight, and I shall soon be out of mind too.

> 'I'll pledge me for no lady's faith,
> Beyond the seventh fair day.'

Small blame to them for their mutability. Shall I blame *her*, poor little girl?" And the sneer died on his lips as his thoughts wandered to her, who had so soon forgotten the love she had once confessed. "Change is the law of the world in which we live: and is it not better for those who can change, who can bury their dead quickly out of sight,

and without looking back with useless regrets on that which is past, press onward to that which is before; who can live in the present; who can be more impressionable than unchangeable?" Ay, better for Guy Lawrence himself if he could have changed with every wind, have floated with every fresh tide, than to have been so true to those who could so little appreciate his truth.

On his return from Erlesmere, two days later, Guy went to see Estelle before leaving England. He would willingly have avoided taking any formal farewell of her if he could have done so without appearing unkind. He scarcely knew why, but he had a vague fear of seeing her for the last time, of how she might take the news of his departure; but this very fear made him feel that it would be cowardly to shirk the leave-taking that ordinary politeness required of him. Moreover, if Estelle really felt some sort of gratitude and affection for him she might be softened at the moment of parting. She might listen if he spoke to her of Bertie, she might yield acquiescence to a request she had before denied, and at his persuasion use her influence to induce Bertie to leave town and go abroad to regain his health.

Guy was never faint-hearted where Bertie's interests were concerned; he was quite ready to renew his petitions again and again, until, like the unjust judge, she was wearied into granting his prayer.

The beautiful cause of so much heart-burning and wretchedness lay back as usual among her cushions, doing nothing; looking, in her shady luxurious room, provokingly cool, languid, and far away from the troubles and perplexities of the outside world.

But the dreaminess of her eyes was lost in the glad light that transfigured her face as Guy came into the room, and she, starting up, held out her hands without a word, but with a smile that was more than a welcome. Guy took them absently, and seated himself by her side in the same abstracted, thoughtful way; and when he spoke it was of the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

"I've come to say good-bye, Celia."

"Good-bye?" she repeated, startled.

"Yes, I am going away."

"Where?"

Her voice trembled, her face paled. It dawned upon her that this was no temporary leave-taking.

"Oh, somewhere, anywhere; what does it

matter? I want to get away from this poisonous atmosphere. I shall probably go abroad again, and not be back for a year or two."

Not a word followed this speech. She sat quite still, but her face had grown white as death, her teeth were clenched together, and her breath came quickly and heavily.

But Guy never noticed any change in her. He who was so tender to those he loved, was unconsciously almost cruel to her.

"It may be such a long time before we meet again, and before I go I want to say one or two things to you."

She interrupted him. "Why need you go—why can't you stay? If you go I feel that I shall never, never see you again."

"Are you sorry to lose me, Celia?" he said with more earnestness and less abstraction. "I believe you are. You are the only one who cares whether I go or stay."

There was a moment's silence. Her heart beat wildly. She knew that this was her last chance, that if she failed to win Guy Lawrence now she lost him for ever, and she could scarcely control her agitation.

"I want to leave my only care, my last request to you Celia. Imagine that I'm

going to leave the world, and that I make you executor of my will. Do you accept the trust?"

She bowed her head in silence, and he continued, "My greatest and most serious anxiety in the world is for Bertie, and I want you to use your influence with him."

She threw back her head with a quick impatient gesture, her lips curled, and the hand which held her fan gave such an angry jerk that the brittle toy snapped in two between her strong white fingers, but still she said nothing.

"He is looking most wretchedly ill, and nothing I can do or say will persuade him to leave town, and take to better hours, and a healthier life. Celia if you were to join your persuasions to mine, if you were to convince him of the folly and the hopelessness of remaining here, he would perhaps come abroad with me, and time and absence would effect his cure."

Her face was set and drawn, her eyes were lowered as if to hide their fierceness, and when she spoke her voice was very low and quiet, yet face and voice were full of a suppressed passion, that seemed as if it must force its way to the surface.

"What do you mean? will you explain yourself more clearly?"

"Is it necessary? will you force me to say what I would rather leave unsaid? Don't you know that it is *you* who keep him here? don't you know that he'd wait for you, and follow you to hell itself if only you beckoned? don't you know that until you choose to dismiss your slave from his thankless, wageless bondage, he isn't a free agent? Don't you know that it is his frantic passion for you, who scorn and despise him, that drives him to these wild excesses, which are ruining him, soul, mind, and body? that the alternations of feverish hope and wild despair are teaching him to drown care in drink? One positive word of dismissal from you, and he would come to his senses. And yet you hesitate to speak it. Good heaven! is it possible? and you are a woman, and they say women are pitiful."

"What right have you to begrudge me his love?" she cried, stung to madness by the bitterness of his words. "Perhaps I cling to it as the only true affection that has been bestowed on me; perhaps some day in my despair I may learn to value it. Oh, surely, surely, if I do not it must be because I am

a fool as well as a woman." Then turning fiercely on him, "At any rate, you have no right to deny it to me."

"Yes I have, because you have no right to it. You accept it, you foster it on false pretences. Do you love him in return?"

"You dare to ask me that question? you dare to taunt me? you who know, ay, must know, that all my life, all my love—oh, what am I saying?" Then, all her pride and passion, all the bitterness of her anger, suddenly melting, she wailed out, "Oh, Guy, Guy, have you no mercy? What am I that you should despise me so? Have some pity on me, for I am indeed most wretched."

"Celia, Celia, what have I done?" cried Guy, in an agony of remorse. "Indeed I never meant—— What have I said?"

He tried to draw away her hands, but she hid her face, and for a few minutes her whole frame shook with uncontrolled passion. Then she slowly raised her head, and tried to speak calmly.

"You mustn't mind what I say. It's only my own folly, only that I could not help—oh, Guy, how could I help—loving you?"

He started up suddenly.

"What have I done? Does a curse follow me wherever I go?" he cried passionately.

"Listen to me, Guy," she said, snatching his hand, and pouring out her words in an eager, impassioned torrent. "I shall never see you again; this will be the last time I shall speak to you. I will tell you all the truth, and then we will part, and you will forget my madness; and I—never mind what I shall do, anyway I shall never blame you. It wasn't your fault that you were so good and great that I, seeing you, could not help loving you. You have been my hero, my god, since the days when you took pity upon me, a poor, wretched, miserable outcast. Ah! can't you imagine how I worshipped you, how you were to me as the light of heaven, how you seemed to my childish fancy a being of another world, who had deigned to speak, to look, to smile on me? It wasn't gratitude, it was idolatry, it was the germ of a love that was to wreck my whole life. It has been my one ambition to be thought well of by you: you were my religion, my conscience, and when I became an actress I did it knowing it was wrong, because you had said so, but I wanted to prove to you that I was capable of being

something greater than you thought me. I have gloried in my beauty, my talents, not in any thankfulness, but because I hoped they might win your love; but it's all over now; I have hung on every word spoken by you; I have clung to every kindly look, believing, hoping, praying that at last you would care for me; and now——"

She drew away her hands, and for a moment hid her face in them.

"It has come to this; that I, who thought myself brave and strong, cry out in my weakness to you, tearing open the wound that you may see me writhe under it." She started up, the half-shed tears dried in her eyes, and her face grew wan and white again in her despair. "You may scorn me, despise me, hate me if you will; I have been wicked, treacherous, unscrupulous, but had you loved me, Guy Lawrence, I should have been a better woman. You have wrecked and ruined my whole future, and yet you come here to ask me to renounce the only unselfish love that has ever sanctified my life. You think it a terrible thing that your brother should love me—you, who have no pity," and bursting into tears she threw herself down on her knees by his side. "Oh,

Guy, have a little mercy, take what you ask, my life, my soul, but oh, give me a loving look, a kind word in return."

She pressed her lips to his hand, raising her beautiful tear-stained face to his, that was bowed down in utter misery and shame, the large drops standing in her great soft eyes.

"Oh, Guy, my love, my love, don't despise, don't loathe me for grovelling at your feet. Oh, don't send me away. Wont you speak? Have you no pity? Oh, Guy—one word!"

Then letting go his hand with inexpressible sadness, her head drooped on her breast. And Guy, troubled beyond measure, tried almost beyond endurance, attempted in vain to answer her.

He felt as if it was almost impossible for him to speak and reject the love which she had thrown at his feet; as if he could not heap shame and humiliation on her who had already humiliated herself so terribly. But it must be done, unless—and there came another thought, the idea of another possibility, which staggered and bewildered him with its strangeness—with the suddenness with which it presented itself to his mind. And little by little, as he looked upon her

in the utter abandonment of her misery, this thought took a tangible form and stood before him clearly, and presented itself to him vividly and inexorably as a solution of all his difficulties.

Should he, whose life had lost all sweetness, all value to himself, give it for the saving of this woman's happiness—this beautiful woman, who in her grief and passion, her softened mood, had strangely moved him—*and for Bertie's?*

The dread that all his brother's life should be wasted in a hopeless passion or in a still more hopeless, loveless marriage, had taken so strong a hold on Guy, that he snatched wildly at any idea that presented a certainty of saving him. It was a fearful crisis in his life, for he could not pause to think calmly, or to calculate the cost of the sacrifice which he contemplated; and yet he knew that on his next words hung the fate of his life—and hers. He bent down and gently raised her from where she knelt, then still keeping her hands in his, he looked tenderly into her half-averted face.

"Celia, heaven help us both! But I must tell you the truth, though, God knows, it pains me more than it will you. I have no

love to give you; I don't deserve yours, and I can't return it."

"Go, and leave me," she faltered. "I am ashamed to look at you—ashamed to see you now."

"Yet knowing this," he continued, without heeding her, "would you be content to trust your life with mine—to follow me for ever through the world?"

"Content?"

The world of passion that was concentrated in that one word, and in the eyes that were raised to his face!

"Heaven forgive me for taking so much, when I have so little to give in return. I can never love you as a man should love a woman to justify him in asking her to share his life, but all else in my power shall be yours; and I can be good to you, Celia, true and faithful, and tender. Will you trust me?"

For all answer she looked at him.

"My wife!" he said, gravely; and stooped down and kissed her.

A crimson flush spread all over her face.

"Guy, Guy, I am not fit. You will be ashamed of me; you will remember always that——"

"I will remember nothing," he interrupted quietly, "but that you are good and true to me."

He drew her gently to him until her head rested on his shoulder; but even as she lay there, sobbing tears of gratitude and joy, of inexpressible happiness, a wistful look of sadness stole over his face, and his eyes wandering far away from her, seemed to be gazing into the mists of an unfathomable future.

CHAPTER III.

THOSE words in which Guy Lawrence asked Celia to be his wife were spoken on the impulse of a critical moment; but though he knew when he uttered them how irrevocable they were, how they bound him for ever to a woman whom he did not love, he scarcely realized in the excitement of the scene all that they involved.

In quietness and in solitude he was able to estimate with the greatest intensity the full extent of the sacrifice he had made.

A man may tell himself that his life is wrecked, his future hopeless; yet not until he has made a step that is irretrievable, not until he has taken upon himself the burden of daily duties that must be performed, not until he has bound himself to an allegiance that can never end but in death, is he fain to acknowledge that it is possible for his last state to be worse than the first. He may think that the bitterness of death is

past, that no pain or disappointment can exceed or indeed equal the pain or disappointment he has already endured, that he has lived his life, and all the long years through which he must exist will only be a question of endurance, and that nothing which he can do or leave undone can materially affect him personally. In his recklessness, his despair, he may take upon himself another burden to those which he already bears, saying "what matters a little more or a little less," and be destined—as Guy Lawrence was—to discover that there are degrees of wretchedness. In the first excitement of this strange and unexpected phase of life, he was carried away by the impulse of self-sacrifice. The belief that he had done that which would make the only two people who had any claim on his consideration happy, buoyed him up, and obliterated all thought of himself.

Celia, weeping in her humiliation and sorrow, had touched him to the very core, and he had felt that it was but a small thing for him to give what he could, his hand without his heart, his life without his love, to her who had given him all.

And Bertie—the frittering away of his

life in a useless dangling after a woman who despised him—the utter ruin of all his hopes and prospects if she married him, would be averted. It was true Bertie would not be likely to see the exact advantage of his brother marrying the woman he loved—but he would, ultimately—Guy had no doubt of that, no doubt that it was for Bertie's real good, and that sooner or later he would thank him for saving him from such a marriage; and he resolved that he would not heed his brother's first anger when he should hear what had passed.

All this he had thought and felt at first, but when a day had passed the reaction came, and everything appeared to him in the gloomiest and most depressing aspect.

Alone at his hotel, disinclined to go out and face the world, yet horribly weary of solitude, Guy Lawrence paced up and down his room like a caged animal who begins to feel how galling is his captivity.

Outside, cabs laden with luggage, rolling to the station; a few old-fashioned carriages, with old-fashioned coachmen half dozing in the sun, with old-fashioned old ladies inside, who cared nothing whether it was in season or out of season, droning along towards the

Park; a few sun-beaten, limp-looking foot-passengers; a charming prospect of muslin dresses and toilettes for the seaside in an opposite window; and a barrel-organ groaning away at "The Last Rose of Summer."

Inside—himself and his own thoughts.

Thoughts of the present, unendurable; of the future, wretched, almost hopeless; of the past—no, of the past Guy felt he could scarcely dare to think. How could he bear to think of the present; for however firmly he had resolved to be unmindful of Bertie's anger, he could not be unmindful of his suffering; he shrank from the thought of that with positive dread, and every pang that Bertie might at that moment be enduring at the discovery of the treachery of the woman whom he loved, woke a double pang in Guy's heart.

As a mother, pitifully tender over her child, tries in vain to nerve herself to witness the sight of its momentary pain by telling herself it is "for its good," so Guy tried to battle against the weakness which made him fear the thought of what Bertie must necessarily endure in this sudden awakening to the truth.

He knew that it was necessary that he should be awakened; but so rudely—and by

him! That was part of the sacrifice he had determined to make, and he would not flinch, though he knew that he was resigning for ever, perhaps, Bertie's trust, Bertie's love; that he would appear to Bertie as the first and primary cause of his unhappiness, and that he would never be able to tell him why he had done this thing—why he had promised to make this woman, whom he did not love, his wife.

All this Guy was determined to try and bear bravely, but he felt as if much thinking of it would drive him mad. Then, was the future more promising? A long vista of weary years spent with a woman who had no tastes, no sympathies, no thoughts, no ideas in harmony with his own; one long endless effort to do his duty, to endeavour to please a capricious, passionate, headstrong woman, who, when her first violent love had spent its force, when the glamour was removed, would probably try his powers of endurance to the uttermost. A loveless servitude, a bondage that would end only in death. Guy Lawrence, whose motto was "loyal," who tried so hard to tune all the actions of his life to that one word, felt it very terrible that he could not feel wholly

loyal to the woman who was to become his wife, that he could not feel proud of her, that he could not divest himself of a feeling of something very like shame at the thought of his marriage with her.

He who so dreaded publicity, he who hated above all things to become notorious or to attract the gaze of his fellow men, was to marry the famous actress, the talked-of, admired, and generally-adored Estelle. He shrunk with morbid horror from the thought of meeting other men, of reading in their looks and manner their wonder and curiosity concerning him. He vowed to himself that he would hide himself—go abroad, shun all those who had known him, and be forgotten; and the place where he had hoped to live out the remainder of his days, the home to which he had hoped to take a young wife to fill his mother's place, must be shut up, or given to Bertie.

It was strange how great a repugnance he had to the thought of Celia's filling the place of the mother whom he had so reverently loved. He had vowed to marry her, to love and honour her, and he would be true to his vow. No doubting thought of her, of her truth and purity, would ever find a

moment's resting-place in his heart, but still he could not bear to think of her there—at Erlesmere, the dear old sacred English home, where his mother had lived, and loved, and died, and where once he had hoped to live with the girl whom he had loved with all the fervour and passion of his nature.

Had loved?—was that then among the things of the past—his love for Kitty? did he not love her still? was not his heart aching sorely for her—little perverse, wilful, unkind Kitty who would not love him? Ay, all his anger against her was gone now; and now that he had lost her for ever he loved her more fervently, more terribly than before.

But between him and her came the remembrance of the woman who was to be his wife, and the thought of Kitty Lorton was among the thoughts of the irrevocable past.

Weary of pacing up and down the room, weary of staring vacantly out of the window, Guy threw himself down on a chair, and burying his face in his hands gave himself up to the gloom and despair which were creeping over him.

No sound in the room but the monotonous buzzing of the flies, the ticking of a clock,

the roll of carriage wheels, and the voices and footsteps of the people who passed beneath the open window.

The striking of the clock roused him. Four o'clock: would Celia be expecting him? Having promised to marry her, was he not bound to fulfil all the duties, commit all the little fooleries that are expected from an engaged man? He sickened at the idea; how could he ever get through the time of his engagement to her without either bitterly disappointing and hurting her, or acting a part and being utterly untrue to himself? When once they were married it would be different, when she was his wife, and he was bound to her by the most sacred tie, he could be true and faithful, tender and considerate to her: he felt he could better fill the part of a husband than of a lover. How could he go to her with the ardent empressement of a man who grudges every moment that he is forced to spend apart from the woman who is to be his wife? how could he find it in his heart to be caressingly attentive, affectionate, reverent, and devoted, as a man should be at such a time?

He almost groaned at the idea. Better to be married to her at once; better to

make this time, which is the happiest of some people's lives, as brief as possible in theirs. He started up, resolved that he would go to her, bid her throw over the few remaining days of her theatrical engagement, and ask her to marry him at once, and come with him abroad, anywhere, anywhere out of the world, that would be staring and gaping, and wondering and sneering at them. But as he rose up he heard the sound of a footstep on the stairs, and he sat down again, for he knew who was coming, knew too well who and what were coming.

The door opened and Bertie entered, livid with passion, an open letter in his hand. He threw down his hat and strode up to where Guy was standing.

"There's no need to explain my visit," he said, his voice choked with anger, "you know all about this letter, of course," and he flung it on the table.

"I know nothing of it," answered Guy calmly.

"It's from her—Celia."

"Then I can guess its purport."

There was a pause. Guy looked pale, and his lips were rigidly set. Bertie's eyes glared with passion, and he hissed through

his teeth, "So you and that she-devil, that vile, infamous woman—ah, you may wince—have plotted to trick and fool me. You thought, being my brother, to escape the punishment that such scoundrelism——"

Guy interrupted him sternly.

"Stay!" he cried; "if I were *not* your brother you would have already suffered for the words you have dared to utter. You feel aggrieved; you think I have wronged you. In losing Celia——"

"Gracious heaven! Do you think that her loss can give me a pang now? Do you think I can feel anything but loathing and contempt for such a shameless, degraded wretch? I tell you she would be powerless to move one atom of regard in me if she begged and prayed for it, and grovelled at my feet, as she did at yours."

"Silence!"

"Will you deny it? She avowed it only a moment ago," Bertie went on, with a bitter, mocking laugh. "I have just left her. She, the proud, imperious Estelle, kissing the dust in her humility. And you—the soul of honour and truth, the mirror of chivalry—a treacherous, cowardly fool. Yes, fool!—to be gulled and tricked by a base-born, scheming adventuress, who'll sell her-

self to any other, as she has sold herself to you, if he bids higher for her painted face and false smiles!"

"Silence, I say!"

"Or is it a mere sentimental quixotism, and is this the so-called reparation to a woman whom you fancy you have wronged, by making her your mistress?"

"Good heavens! are you mad? Don't you know that I would *kill* anyone else who dared to say such things to me?"

The words were thundered forth, and a light shone in his eyes like the glare of a tiger at bay. Then, in a calmer tone, he continued—

"Listen to me. I don't hope that you, in the blindness of your passion, will see any higher motive for my conduct than one that is base and dishonourable; but in justice to her who is to bear my name, you must, you shall hear the truth. I knew she had no love for you; more, I knew that the preference she showed you was to keep you near her to serve some purpose she had in regard to myself. I knew she loved me. Ah, laugh if you will; it will take more than a contemptuous sneer from you to turn me from speaking the plain, bare truth, as it must be told. I would have saved you

from Celia at all hazards, for I knew that a marriage between you would have ended in misery—a continuation of your hopeless infatuation, without marriage, in present humiliation and utter recklessness in the future. I would have prevented all this at any cost, if not for your sake, for the sake of our dead mother. I saw that, blinded as you were, you would have gone to your ruin in spite of me. I also saw, that though I have humbled Celia by my indifference, and repulsed her by my antagonism, she has cherished a long and true love for me. God knows, I have done enough harm in the world! it seemed that I might do some good. By making her my wife I could save her perhaps from a dark and sinful future. I could save you from misery. You have wrung this confession from me. Bertie, think of the wrong you have done me, for I swear to heaven I have spoken the truth."

There was something impressive in his tone that checked Bertie in the blindness of his fury, but he was still chafing too much to hold his peace.

"And so this noble sacrifice is to save me from that woman I was weak enough to love," he sneered. "You've cured me of

that, and no mistake; I'd see her starving in the streets, and feel no more concern for her than for the pence I'd toss to her. Be wise in time, and spare yourself this martyrdom. You may kick her overboard without the least fear on my account."

Guy looked at him sternly, and his lips trembled as he answered,

"You may condemn me as a fool, perhaps I am one, but your persuasion will never induce me to become a scoundrel. Celia Ragoni is my affianced wife—remember that; and from this moment I request, I demand that you will mention her name with respect."

"I shan't be so proud of the connexion as to care to mention it at all;"—Guy's lips curled satirically as he thought what different sentiments Bertie had expressed but a short time ago—with a contempt he could not repress at the meanness, the cowardice of speaking as he did now, of a woman whom he had loved—"but Celia Ragoni, or Estelle the actress rather, is public property; and if you expect to silence every flippant tongue that tacks her name to a coarse insinuation, you'll be tilting at windmills, and no mistake."

Guy bit his lips, and a frown gathered on his face, but he did not speak.

There was a pause—an awkward one, and then Bertie took up his hat.

"Well, there's nothing more to be said, I suppose. I believe that you have treated me dishonourably, infamously—I come to you to demand an explanation of your conduct: you swear to heaven that what you have done has been for my sake. Incredible and absurd as the whole thing appears, I can't give you the lie; I can only congratulate you on every chance of happiness in your married life, and thank you for having saved me from the devil incarnate in a woman's form."

"I will not quarrel with you, I'm determined."

"No, pray don't, but in case your resolution should fail you, I'd better go."

And Bertie turned to the door, but Guy advanced with a wistful, pained look—"Not like this, Bertie: I'm going abroad. I don't know when we shall meet again; who knows what may have happened before then?"

Bertie stood tapping his boot with his cane, but he did not speak.

"I want you to use Erlesmere while I'm

away. I've left all the necessary directions—will you do me this favour?"

A vision of the old house, filled with a gay party in the shooting season, and the well-stocked preserves of the home park, rose before Bertie.

"Oh yes, by all means, if you like," he replied, with careless hauteur, as if he were conferring, rather than accepting a favour.

"And now—good-bye," and Guy held out his hand.

Bertie took it without a word; then turned to the door and left the room, and as the door closed a look almost of triumph passed over Guy Lawrence's face. He had so fully and surely attained the end for which he had striven. Bertie was so completely disillusioned, so effectually saved, it was not for him to grudge any sacrifice for the achieving of such an object. But the look of triumph was but a transient one, and he could not help counting the cost, the terrible cost to himself, of what he had done. All the bitter truths which Bertie had so vindictively and remorselessly hurled at him came back to his mind, and he almost shuddered as he acknowledged to himself that they were truths.

He—whose idea of a wife was of a creature pure, spotless, and as far beyond the whisper of the world's poisonous gossip as that proverbial wife of Cæsar's—was to take unto himself one whose name had been on every tongue, whose beauty had been exhibited to every eye, the probability or improbability of whose virtue had been discussed and jested about in every club-room in London. The thought maddened him—in vain he tried to rid himself of it; he felt that it would haunt him ceaselessly through all his future life. He tried to remind himself of the loyalty, the respect he owed to her, he tried to rouse himself, to cast aside these gloomy reflections; he took up the letter which Bertie had thrown down on the table, and began to read it, half mechanically at first, but with more interest as he went on.

It had no commencement. Celia had been in doubt, perhaps, how to address the man whom she had wronged, and, womanlike, solved the difficulty by plunging straight into the subject. It ran thus:—

"I know that in writing to you now I forfeit all the love you have lavished on me. I know that when you read what I must say to you, you will despise, perhaps curse

me, as the destroyer of your happiness; but a confession of the truth is the only reparation I can make you for the cruel wrong I have done you, and I have vowed to make it. I have deceived you pitilessly, mercilessly; I have led you to believe that I loved you more than I would confess. I have fed you with vain hopes; I have sacrificed you to the gratification of my own vanity, as a fancied means to the attainment of the desire of my life. I have repaid all that was generous and loyal in your regard for me by the cruellest treachery, for I have never loved you. I love your brother Guy.

"Despise me, hate me as you will, as you must, but lay all the blame on me, for I alone deserve it. You must hear the truth from me, for you will never hear it from him. I know too well the chivalry of his nature to suppose he would make a woman's love, a woman's self-humiliation, the shield to defend him from such reproaches as may be cast upon him through me.

"He has asked me to be his wife from the purest of all motives: to save me from the despair of a life wrecked by a hopeless love. I have striven and waited, and hoped and prayed, that I might gain his love—all in vain—but he, in his generosity, has saved

me from such a fate as I have tried to bring upon *you*. Bertie, I can't ask you to forgive me, for I know I never even thought of you, never once cared whether I wrecked your life or not, in the wild desire to attain my own happiness.

"Even the atonement I would make to you now if I could is for *his* sake, because *he* wishes it, and the humiliation that I bring upon myself in making this confession, is the just punishment of my sin.

"I do not really fear for your future as *he* does, because I feel so sure that your love cannot outlive such hard truths as I tell you now, because I know that you will scorn me too much even to hate me long. Forget me if you can. I can ask nothing more of you whom I have so deeply wronged.

"CELIA RAGONI."

The letter dropped from Guy's hand—the confession of her great love for himself touched him with something like remorse.

"Heaven grant that she may not be bitterly disappointed," he thought, sorrowfully conscious of how little he returned it.

"She has told the bare truth, she has made all the reparation she can. *I* will never reproach her again."

CHAPTER IV.

THOUGH most people had left town Parliament was still sitting, and some few families remained until the release of husband or father from the urgent duties of the Upper or Lower House enabled them to seek the repose and retirement of country life.

Among them the Hoares, for Mr. Hoare was a member of St. Stephen's. A very fussy member, and a very affectionate husband and father, he could only settle the rival claims of affairs political and affairs domestic, by prevailing on his wife to share with him the miseries of fashion-forsaken London; and she made the sacrifice with the feelings of a martyr and the condescending grace of a goddess; for though she knew that every consideration of duty as a leader of fashion required that she should be out of town when everyone else was out of

town, she was a model wife, and, like Mrs. Micawber, would never desert her husband. Of all the members of her household Kitty Lorton suffered most by this arrangement. She had been ailing and drooping for some time, and now the change in her became very perceptible to the most unobservant eyes. Country-born and bred, accustomed to spend all her days in the open air, she seemed to wither and stifle in the confinement of her new life and the oppressive atmosphere of London.

The horror of her father's death, and the terror she had suffered in her loneliness and misery, had told upon her delicate organization, and little by little her strength seemed to desert her; day by day she grew weaker and paler, and it seemed a harder struggle to fight against the illness that was stealing over her. But those who watched her, and pitied her, and tried their best to help her, knew nothing of the secret grief that was weighing on her mind and undermining her strength; knew nothing of the sleepless nights, the remorseful tears, the sickening doubts, the feverish hopes, that were telling on her, mentally as well as physically.

The regret, the vague remorse, that had

come to her, even before her passion had cooled, as Guy Lawrence, reproachful, wounded, and angry, had left her standing under the trees, had gained on her as the days went by.

Doubts whether she had judged him too hastily crept little by little into her mind. Wishes that she had spoken less bitterly—told him why she accused him, and given him a chance of defending himself, changed gradually into self-accusations, terrible regrets, and vain, piteous longings.

She suffered an agony of shame and remorse when she remembered how she had spoken to him, when she thought of how she must appear in his eyes. The longing to speak to him, to ask him for his forgiveness, and then to hide herself away for ever out of his sight, grew greater and greater as she got weaker.

At night she would start up out of her feverish sleep, haunted by confused, half-waking dreams. Such strange, terrible dreams they were. Sometimes her father's face, distorted and convulsed with horror and passion, would change into a cold white face in a coffin —Lady Caroline's face, looking up at her with reproachful eyes—and then, somehow, fading

slowly and strangely it seemed to grow like Guy's, and the lips, the dead, drawn lips, would move, and Kitty, waking up, sobbing and crying, shivering in very terror of the darkness, and yet more afraid of sleep which brought such hideous visions, would creep out of bed, and, drawing up the blind, sit and watch until the cold grey dawn chased away the horrible night.

No one knew or imagined *all* she suffered, but it left its traces in her pale face and heavy eyes; and Mrs. Hoare insisted on her seeing the family doctor, a grave elderly man, who shook his head, called it "nervous debility," and prescribed a mild tonic.

But the tonic did not produce any immediate effect, and Mrs. Hoare was beginning to grow disappointed, and to feel her unlimited faith in the elderly doctor might be shaken, when, one morning at breakfast, she observed a real change for the better in her governess. Miss Lorton had a faint tinge of colour in her pale cheeks, the grey shadow under her eyes was less visible than usual, she looked brighter and her smile was less forced, and more frequent. Miss Lorton was cross-examined, "Had she slept?" "Yes; very well towards the morn-

ing." "Had she more appetite?" "Oh, yes," and Mrs. Hoare turned the subject, and mentally congratulated herself on her valuable doctor, and the effect of the tonic.

But Kitty knew better, or might have known, had she considered the subject; but she was thinking and caring little about her health, and much of other things. A resolution taken and acted upon that very night, was the real cause of the change in her, for it had lifted a load off her mind, and she felt freer and lighter and happier than she had done for many days. At that very moment while Mrs. Hoare was cross-examining her, she was conscious of a letter hidden away in her pocket, all written, sealed, and directed to Guy Lawrence—a letter that was only waiting to be sent until she could get away by herself to post it, for it could not be trusted to any of the servants.

In the dead of the night it had been written; when all the other people in the house were slumbering, she had started up unable to sleep, unable any longer to keep her sorrow and her repentance hidden away in her heart, and in the quiet solemnity of the hour, she had gained courage to do what for days she had yearned to do.

For the remembrance of Guy Lawrence, as he used to be, rose up before her eyes, and compelled her to doubt the evidence which she, in her passion, had believed to be all-sufficient proof of his treachery. The echo of his loving words, his tender looks, haunted her day and night, and almost compelled her to believe in the love he had professed for her.

Stern, grave, cold he might be to others, but to her he had been always kind, tender, and forbearing, even when she had been violent and passionate. That emboldened her to confess to him that she had been wrong, and the resolution to do so once formed, she could not rest until it was acted upon.

Day after day she hoped some chance might bring her in his way, and give her the power of speaking to him, but each day she hoped in vain; and that night her restlessness grew beyond her control, and creeping out of bed she lighted her candle, and, opening her desk, sat down to write to him.

If Guy Lawrence could have been gifted with some sort of second-sight that night, if he could have seen in a vision that little

white-robed figure, that small pale face, half hidden in a cloud of floating hair, bent low over the paper, what an agony of regret he would have endured at a knowledge gained too late, of what might have been. If Kitty Lorton, penning her little, simple, sorrowful confessions, could have known how at that very moment the man she was writing to was pacing up and down his room, with his heart and brain on fire with conflicting love and duty!

But they neither of them knew—neither of them ever would know.

The letter was written—a little letter that said nothing of the love she still felt for him, only confessed that she had been wrong; prayed his forgiveness for her anger and bitterness, and told him why she had doubted him, and that she regretted with all her heart she had been too proud and passionate to tell him at the time; but if it had ever reached Guy Lawrence, and reached him before it was too late—before he had bound himself to another—the unconscious tenderness that lay hidden in every word would have revealed itself to his eyes, and would have brought him to her again, devoted and loving as ever.

Kitty felt happier directly it was written; it seemed to her as if she had been speaking to Guy, as if the load of sorrow that was so hard to bear silently and alone was already lightened. She stole noiselessly back to bed, and with her precious letter safe under her pillow, slept calmly and peacefully till the morning.

All the morning she went about with it in her pocket, only waiting—only waiting for the afternoon to come, that she might be free to go out. And the hours went by, the hours that seemed so slow to her, but yet were bringing her nearer and nearer to a terrible fate.

The luncheon-bell rang, and Kitty descended to the dining-room a little in advance, as it happened, of the children; and as she opened the door she heard Mr. Hoare speaking with unwonted energy.

"It *can't* be true!"

Mr. Hoare was alone in the room with his wife. It seemed as if he had only just come in, for his hat and stick were on the table; he was fidgeting nervously about the room, taking up a book and putting it down again, moving an ornament, arranging a chair, looking very red and hot, and very

discomposed. He turned as the door opened, took up his hat, and moved towards it, then came back and addressed his wife in an audible whisper.

"It is true, and it's disgraceful—a disgrace that reflects on the whole family."

Mrs. Hoare made a warning sign, and looked towards the children; and he left the room, encountering Lily Ransford in the doorway.

"Anything up?" asked that young lady. "You look as if something or somebody had upset your mental equilibrium, Charlie."

But he made no answer, and Mrs. Hoare said nothing of the cause of those words that Kitty had unintentionally overheard. What could they mean? They were spoken so strangely, so excitedly. She tried to forget them, to tell herself she had no right to speculate on other people's affairs, but they would keep recurring to her mind. "It can't be true!" Why should those words haunt her with a vague uneasiness, a dim foreboding of evil? She found herself watching Mrs. Hoare with a curiosity which was by no means diminished by the repressed excitement of her manner.

Mr. Hoare too, when he returned to the

room, was silent and gloomy, and seemed plunged in unpleasant reflections. Lily Ransford's quick glance went from one to the other, and settled finally on her sister.

"Clara, you've got something on your mind—you've got a secret: I can see it in your face; it's no good trying to keep it from me—what is it?" Then in an audible whisper:

"Doesn't your last chignon match, and is *all* that money wasted; or have you and Charlie been having a row, or oh—I have it—Madame Elise has sent in her bill. I don't wonder he scolded; it *was* a staggerer, as Bertie would say——"

"What nonsense you talk, Lily. I really wish you wouldn't indulge in slang: it is so unladylike."

"That's right, Clara, abuse me, it is such a safety-valve to abuse some one when you're out of temper, but I'm not offended; I'll give you my advice all the same. If it's the chignon, change it; if it's Charlie, snub him; if it's Madame Elise, don't pay her."

"Do leave me alone, and mind your own affairs."

"Haven't got any, thank heaven. I'm an infant—can't be made responsible for my debts, amatory or monetary——"

"You're not an infant, Aunt Lily."

"Yes, my child, a very fine baby for my age too, only just short-coated," with a glance at her short Watteau skirts, "and with a taste for sweets—some more tart please, Clara. There's the postman; a love-letter for me, bet you sixpence. For me, William?" as the servant entered with a letter on a salver; "oh, bother, only one for Clara. Who's it from?"

But she received no answer. Mrs. Hoare took the letter and, tearing it open hastily, read it eagerly. Kitty, still watching her, noticed that her face paled suddenly, that she compressed her lips, and the hand which folded up the letter, which seemed but a short one, trembled. Mrs. Hoare looked across to her husband. Their eyes met.

"It *is* true," she said in a low, emphatic tone.

He shrugged his shoulders without a word. Lily stared at them in undisguised astonishment, and that was all. Luncheon was over, there was no excuse for remaining, and Kitty rose and left the room.

The children went upstairs, but she turned into the drawing-room to sort some music that Mrs. Hoare had asked her to lay aside

for packing. She went about her task very leisurely, with some dim hope that Lily would join her and perhaps let fall some hint that would set at rest the uneasy feeling which so strangely and unreasonably had taken possession of her. It seemed so absurd to trouble herself about what had passed at luncheon. Why should it have anything to do with her—or with Guy? For without reason—utterly without any knowledge, she somehow or other connected Mrs. Hoare's words, looks, and manner; Mrs. Hoare's letter, with Guy. Was it because all her thoughts were dwelling on him? She tried to think so, and stooped down behind the piano and began turning over the pile of music, with a determination not to worry herself about phantoms, creations of her own troubled mind.

Voices on the staircase, and Mrs. Hoare and Lily entered the inner drawing-room in earnest discussion.

"It's a dreadful blow to me; I couldn't have believed it of him. Other men one might have expected to do such a thing—but he——"

Kitty started up from behind the piano. She knew they did not see her, and she instantly made herself visible.

"I am sorting the music," she said. "Shall I go, if you are talking?"

"Go! why should you go? Continue what you are doing, pray, Miss Lorton. Why should we attempt to conceal what all the world knows by this time?" exclaimed Mrs. Hoare, throwing herself petulantly back into an arm-chair.

"I wouldn't put myself out so much about it, Clara, if I were you," said Lily. "It's very unfortunate, or at least it seems so to us; but it's a *fait accompli*, and it's no use groaning over it."

"How can you be so heartless, so indifferent to every one else's fate but your own? If you can calmly contemplate his ruin, I can't."

"Ruin, Clara! that's a strong word; why should you call it ruin? I, for one, honour him for marrying a woman he loves, whoever she may be."

"Honour him for marrying that painted creature, who night after night exhibits herself half-clothed in the glare of the gas-lights! I'm ashamed of you, Lily; and how can he love *her?* One would have thought no one but a senseless boy would have been entrapped into marrying such a woman as that."

"I suppose he must love her, or why should he marry her? It seems to me, Clara, you take a prejudiced view of the subject. It's a pity, a great pity, but after all, I daresay she's as good as other women."

"Good? how can she be good? She's an actress."

"Must she necessarily be bad because she's an actress? For heaven's sake, Clara, be above the hypocritical cant of the people who condemn all actors and actresses to perdition. Why should you speak so mercilessly of them? Aren't there dozens of good women who have chosen that profession, and made themselves famous and respected in it?" cried Lily, her cheeks flushed with indignation.

"Your eloquence is rather wasted, Lily: you know I've no such absurd ideas; but no decent woman would exhibit herself as an actress——"

"Is obliged to do, to suit the taste of those who go to see her. Then all I can say is, if indelicacy reigns behind the footlights, it's indelicate to sit before them; if actresses are immodest, those who go to see them, and rave and applaud, and devour them through their lorgnettes, are doubly so;

and though they may dress or undress, as the case may be, to please their audience, do they set the fashion, or follow it? Lady Hautton, with the slip of satin round her waist she calls a bodice, would raise a shout of virtuous indignation on the boards, but she is quoted as the 'mode,' and suffers perfect immunity off them."

"You haven't any right to talk as you do; it isn't at all becoming in a girl of your age," responded Mrs. Hoare, with an idea that she was on untenable ground; and there was a momentary pause in the discussion. And all the while Kitty listened in the agony of suspense, possessed by a terrible sickening fear. Each word seemed to have a portentous meaning, and the dread that the next might confirm her horrible anticipation, made her shake and shiver so that she could not hold the music; her face grew white as death; she bent her head and leant against the piano for support; her breath came in faint, laboured gasps.

She felt in another moment she must cry out, and ask them who it was, who it could be that was going to marry an actress. And why should Mrs. Hoare care so much—why should Mr. Hoare speak of a disgrace re-

flected on them, unless it was some near relation? Was it possible that it was Bertie of whom they were speaking? A feeling of intense relief came over her at the idea; but an instant's reflection convinced her that it could not be. Mrs. Hoare's words and manner made it impossible. Bertie had no power to cause her such extreme vexation, such intense regret, as she had expressed; and if it wasn't Bertie, then who else? Oh, it *couldn't* be! She felt that she wronged Guy Lawrence by the mere thought, and yet the dread that was upon her grew greater. She tried to speak, but her throat and lips were parched, and the words would not come.

Mrs. Hoare, and Lily at some little distance from her, and intent on their own thoughts, never observed her.

"I can't bear to hear you defend her, Lily," said Mrs. Hoare, rousing herself after a moment's silence. "I have seen her, *you* have seen her, times without number; for, thanks to the present state of society, one cannot go anywhere without meeting those sort of people; and leaving alone the question of her mode of life, I think there's scarcely a woman in the world who I wouldn't rather see a friend married to."

"You can't tell what she is from just a glimpse of her in the Park, and I'm sure she is very, very beautiful."

"It's a hard, cruel, sensual face. I wouldn't trust a dog to that woman's mercy," cried Mrs. Hoare, passionately. "If poor Aunt Caroline could but know it, she wouldn't rest in her grave. I couldn't have believed it of him; if you had asked me who was the last man in the world to make a foolish, senseless marriage, I should have said—Guy Lawrence." And with a half-repressed sob she raised her handkerchief to her eyes, and went hastily out of the room.

"That's right," said Lily. "Go and have a good cry; it will do you no end of good. I don't know what we women should do if we couldn't cry and drink tea when we're miserable. Huilo! where are you off to, Kitty?" as she caught sight of a black dress disappearing through the farther door. But there was no answer, and Lily Ransford, too lazy to pursue her, caught up a novel, and sank back on the sofa. And Kitty escaped.

Escape was her only thought. For a moment she had stood there, stunned and helpless under the cruel blow which had

fallen on her. She felt as if an icy hand had laid itself on her heart and on her brain, and dulled her senses and stopped her breath; but one idea seemed left to her, the necessity to escape unseen and hide herself. With a terrible effort she roused herself, with a terrible effort she controlled her shaking limbs, and with a last effort after self-command compelled herself to move slowly towards the door. Outside—she paused and tried to recover herself; she was afraid she might faint—she felt so strange; *was* it faintness, this strange, numbed feeling, this dull aching in her head, that made everything look so altered and unreal, that made everything seem as if it was receding from her—leaving her alone—alone in the midst of a terrible darkness?

She sat down on the stairs and rested her head against the balustrades. The cold of the iron as it touched her forehead revived her, and after a moment she recovered herself and got up. She ascended the stairs very slowly, very wearily, walking as if she were in a dream. She went into her room, she shut and bolted the door, and sat down, still in the same dreamy way, and looked round her, as if the old familiar things had

somehow changed their aspect and grown strange and unreal. She did not cry, or moan, or faint; she sat quite still, only now and then she seemed to catch her breath, as if she were gasping for air, and once or twice she put her hand to her forehead as if to collect her thoughts, or still the aching of her brain.

After a while, still in the same dreamy way, she took out the letter she had in her pocket, and looked long at the address; then she broke the seal, and read it through, very carefully and slowly, and when she had finished it she tore it across, and then again and again till it was in a hundred pieces. With that same stunned, helpless look on every line of her white face and slight, drooping figure, she sat motionless, and looked with terrible intensity at the torn letter, as if in that little heap of tiny scraps of white paper lay buried every hope of her life.

Utterly worn out in body and mind, it seemed as if the shock which she had received had for the moment deadened all power of sensation in her. Her mind refused to grasp the whole truth, and yet every word she had heard seemed indelibly

engraven on her memory, and over and over again she repeated to herself one sentence, carelessly uttered—one sentence wherein lay the cruellest sting of all—"He must love her, or why should he marry her?"

CHAPTER V.

A FORTNIGHT later a girl kept weary vigil through the long, slow hours of a sultry summer's night.

The atmosphere was like a heavy pall, the earth seemed to gasp and faint under some terrible oppression, low mutterings of distant thunder, sudden lurid flashes of light amid the dusky clouds, not a breath of air to stir the ghostly branches of the trees, not a ray of light to break the dark masses of blackest shadow that lay under them—the very night seemed pregnant of some mysterious portent of coming ill.

She—Kitty Lorton—knelt by a low window in a large old-fashioned country house, and with her hands clasped in front of her, and her head resting against the frame, looked out into the darkness.

Rest seemed farther from her than ever that night; her heart and brain were burning with a fire which showed itself in the bright

crimson spots on her cheeks, and the dull glow of her heavy eyes.

The apathetic despair that had at first deadened all power of acute sensation in her, had given place to a fever of suspense.

If it was only over. How long must she wait for the death-blow to fall? How long must she shiver and sicken at the thought of it?

If it was only over—then this agony of regret and vain remorse might be stilled. Then—knowing the reality and the greatness of the gulf that lay for ever between her and the man she loved—her love might pass away, and with it, her regret and her remorse.

No anger, no indignation against Guy Lawrence, made the thought that she had lost him for ever easier to bear. Too late she knew that it was all her own fault. Too late she knew that she had misjudged him utterly, and condemned him unheard. Too late she believed that he really had loved her, and that it was she who in her wickedness had driven him to marrying another woman.

"Oh, God," she moaned, as she buried her head in her hands, and the hot tears burned in her eyes: "if I had not been so blind—so blind——"

Again she dropped her hands and looked out through the mist of tears, far away into the gloomy, lowering sky—looked and looked as if she read her own dark future there. Looked and looked, until her heart ached so sorely with the dreariness of her life, and gasping sobs tore her heaving bosom, and shook her slender drooping figure.

"All my own doing. Why didn't I say one word, one kind word; why didn't I call him back when he left me? All my own doing."

That was the bitterest thought of all; therein lay sorrow's crown of sorrows; the knowledge that all she most longed for had been hers, and she had lost it—thrown it away—sinfully, wilfully. Could she live and bear it? Would it never, never leave her—this maddening recollection, this sickening regret for what might have been?

It seemed to her then that it must be comparatively so easy for people to accept, with the calmness of a despair which has never been ruffled by hope, the ills which are not the result of their own folly—the ills which come to them in the natural course of their lives.

But to look back and know that two paths

had lain before her, the one all bright with the sunshine of happiness and love, the other dark and dreary, and, oh, so lonely—to look back and know that she had chosen the one and left the other—ah! there lay the misery of it.

"He loved me once, perhaps he loves *her* now. She is so beautiful; but I did it, I drove him to her—I was so hard and cruel, and taunting; and she, of course she was loving—how could she help loving him?" she sobbed to herself. The hours of that summer night were slowly passing, and still she knelt by the window and watched and waited for the dawn. "If I could only ask him to forgive me!—but I never can. I can never speak to him, never see him any more. Perhaps even now he is—married."

How she shivered and trembled at the word! Married—and she was enduring, nay, indulging this agony of remorse and love and regret for another woman's husband. The thought stung her with a terrible pain; she stretched out her arms with a low cry, as if she would have bridged over the chasm which lay between them.

"Guy, Guy, never more, I must never even love you any more."

For even love had grown to be sin.

Poor little wilful, innocent girl. She unfastened with her small trembling hands a plain gold locket which had lately hung round her neck day and night. She opened it and took out a little torn, crumpled piece of paper. She smoothed it out to look at it once more—only once more. She gazed lovingly at the large writing, the old familiar words

"Loyal je serai durant ma vie."

How they seemed to mock her and to laugh at her. She kissed them passionately again and again: she held the little scrap of paper to her feverish lips as if she could never part from it, and the hot tears rained down her cheeks upon it.

"The only little bit of him left to me—and even that I must give up."

She tore it across again and again—she whispered "good-bye, good-bye," as though she was parting from her last friend. She scattered the pieces to the winds, and they caught them with a sudden fierce breath and bore them away from her out into the darkness. She strained her eyes to look after them, but they could not pierce the grey,

unfathomable mists. She cried and wept, but only the low wail of the rising wind answered her. Stillness and darkness fell on her and on all the sleeping earth.

Suddenly a cold shiver ran through her. A streak of red light broke through the heavy clouds in the eastern sky.

The dawn had broken.

The dawn of Guy Lawrence's wedding-day.

The morning came, a dull, gloomy morning, with a grey, changeless sky, and a stifling, poison-tainted atmosphere.

The doors of a large church at the west end of London stood ajar, and such dim rays of daylight as glimmered through the dusty windows of the great, dreary, empty building revealed two or three figures, moving in silent, ghostly procession up the long, deserted aisles, standing before the altar, repeating some words in dim voices, whose low tones seemed to echo in sepulchral whispers through the gloom.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered together in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation——"

The congregation consisted of a middle-

aged lady, in a stiff silk dress, who was discharging her last duty as "companion," and giving the bride away—with ulterior hopes and visions of a handsome present to be obtained thereby; a pew-opener, who crept mysteriously about, clanking a bunch of keys like an uneasy spirit; and a clerk, with a very big Prayer-book, and a very husky voice.

Even at that solemnest of all solemn moments, the bridegroom could scarcely repress a grim smile at the thought of the congregation.

The clergyman droned through the service; the clerk struggled through the responses; the beautiful bride trembled and blushed; but the grave, quiet face, the deep sorrow-marked eyes of the bridegroom never changed. The strange, powerful words that have made so many hearts throb and beat fell unheeded on their ears. The woman was so full of her new wonderful happiness, the man so full of his own thoughts—thoughts that had carried him so far away, that he woke with a start to find there was a silence, and they were waiting for him to speak. "I will." Was it he who uttered the words? It seemed to him as if it was

the echo of a far-away voice, not his own, and he, in a sort of trance, was listening to them, it was so unnatural, so unreal. Could he be standing here vowing "to love and to cherish until death" another woman? Could it be that he who had dreamt—Heaven keep him from such dreams now!

The warm, trembling fingers shivered at the touch of his cold hand, the great pleading eyes looked pitifully up into his face—"I, Celia, take thee, Guy, to be my wedded husband." How the words reproached him! He let her hand drop, and as they knelt down, buried his face in his folded arms, and prayed, as he had never prayed yet, to be forgiven for the sin he was committing. "Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder." Never any more! for through life unto death must those two cleave unto each other, "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health."

As Guy Lawrence held his trembling bride in his arms, and looked at the lovely tear-stained face, a strange wild feeling of regret which was almost despair for what he had done, came over him; for even then, with the echo of his own vows ringing in

his ears, he fully realized that she whom he had sworn to love he could not love, and that one who was dearer to him than all the world beside was now severed from him hopelessly, inexorably. "Celia, my wife, God make me good to you!" And this prayer, uttered in a low tone, with heartfelt earnestness, was Guy Lawrence's greeting to his wife.

CHAPTER VI.

BERTIE DEVERELL'S was not a temperament to brood long over troubles that were merely sentimental.

Like most youths of his age, he implicitly believed that the calf-love which had afflicted him, while it lasted, was the truest, noblest, deepest passion that man ever felt for woman; but when it had run its course, abruptly checked in its career by the conviction that he was being fooled and made ridiculous, his *amour propre* came to his rescue, and he began to think that, after all, the grapes were sour; certainly not worth the cost of cutting, while so many good things of this world were easily within his reach.

To be sure the flame had blazed somewhat furiously, fanned as it was by Celia's coquetries; and his self-willed passionate temperament had made him fret and fume rather more than is customary amongst the cynical jeunesse of the nineteenth century; but the

thought that he, who prided himself on his knowledge of, and success with women, had been hoodwinked like the greenest boy, rankled within him, and this blow to his vanity had thus proved fatal to his passion.

But though he ceased to sigh for the love that was dead, or the tendresse rather that was prematurely strangled, he had not forgiven Guy for the part he played in the affair. Bertie's pride was too much wounded not to require the salve of consolation in some form or another, and so he persuaded himself that it was owing to Guy's treachery only that the preference Celia professed to feel for him, Bertie, was not really an existing fact.

All this he thought the morning after his interview with Guy, as he lay stretched on the sofa in his room. Reflection never had a cheering effect upon Bertie—communing with himself, he was tête-à-tête with the gloomiest of companions; his thoughts would turn to the wasted past; or the future, with a forecast of its difficulties, would obtrude upon them. Things had gone all wrong. Bills were falling due; all his turf investments had turned out badly, the greatest "morals" had turned out mis-

takes, the biggest "pots" had been upset, the merest "flukes" and the most unheard of accidents had made a difference of thousands to him.

The increasing bustle and excitement of the life he had led gave him little time to brood over these things, for the few blank days his racing engagements allowed him were invariably spent in love scenes with Celia; but Goodwood had closed the season of the turf, and no *affaire du cœur* was on the cards to while away the time; so Bertie, depressed and low, and suffering martyrdom from ennui, as he lay upon his sofa, fell back upon the universal panacea of young men nowadays—drank brandy and soda, and smoked a cigar.

He was beginning to feel the soothing effect of his high-priced cabana, when the door opened and Bentham entered.

"Hullo, my prince of Sybarites," he said, "you've missed your *métier*. You ought to have been a Grand Turk or a guardsman —you do nothing so gracefully. What are these weeds like? You don't generally smoke bad bacca, so I'll risk one."

"Smoke a dozen, old fellow; but don't chaff, I'm rather hipped to-day."

"Poor fellow," replied Bentham, with mock sympathy, as he arranged himself in an easy-chair. "Where does the proverbial shoe pinch? Has the Ducal drained you? or did your opponent 'mark the king' oftener than was pleasant last night? or have you been drinking old Phipps' Burgundy—worst in Europe, I swear—believe it's grown on purpose for him? or has Estelle been——?"

Bertie interrupted him.

"Don't speak of her, Bentham. I never wish to hear her name again."

Bentham drew his cigar from his mouth and gave a prolonged whistle.

"Why, Bertie, dear old boy, what's in the wind now? If it isn't a lover's squabble, tell us all about it, but cut it as short as you can."

"No need to cut it short, there's so little to tell."

"Bolted, eh?"

"Not exactly—she's going to be married."

"Married!" cried Bentham, opening his eyes with astonishment. "Nice quiet sort of creature for double harness—who's the man?"

"My brother—Guy."

Bentham uncrossed his legs, bent forward,

staring at Bertie with an amazed air, and blew a cloud of smoke from his mouth. "Guy married to Estelle? The devil!"

After a short pause, "But how's this come about?" he continued with a slight frown; "there's been something like foul play here. How has Lawrence come out of it all?"

The blood mantled into Bertie's face, and his eyes flashed angrily as he made answer. "There's not another man alive that I would tell all this to, Bentham. She has fooled and tricked me. Women of her class generally do when they find it pays—she's no better than the rest; but *he* has betrayed me like a Judas. Preached of sacrifice of self, of brotherly affection, and all that cursed cant, planning all the while the greatest wrong that man can do to man."

And Bertie flung away the end of his cigar, and sat moodily, with his face resting on his hand.

"I tell you what," said Bentham, mixing another soda-and-brandy, "it strikes me you don't quite see this affair in the right light; you rave and fume about this treachery of Guy's, as you are pleased to call it, when really what does it amount to? That he has cut you out in your amourette with Estelle.

There's not another man in London who wouldn't have done the same thing if he had had the chance. The greatest wrong that man can do to man or woman either, depend upon it, is to ruffle his vanity. You may swindle him, rook him at cards, leg him on the race-course, do him out of thousands, and though he may speak of his loss, the real sting will be that he has been outwitted. You may run away with your neighbour's wife, and though he may have hated her as the scourge of his life, and cursed the destiny that bound him to her, longing frantically, despairingly to be free, he will forget the debt he owes you as his deliverer, and hate you. As the destroyer of his honour? Pshaw! no: because his self-conceit is wounded—because a woman has preferred you to him, though he loathed that woman as a noisome serpent."

"It isn't that; I really cared for Celia; I was always thinking of her—picturing a future——"

"Future be hanged! you've grown theatrical, Bertie; cut that—it's bad style. Mean to tell me if you'd been left in possession and had married her that you wouldn't have given all you had to be off

your bargain before three months had passed? Of course you would. It isn't the loss of Estelle that piques you now, it's the thought that another man could do you out of her—beat you on your own course. In this sort of race the heaviest-weighted wins; that's about the form of it, and that's the secret of Guy's success. Now give me a liquor. Never preached so much in my life before, give you my word; don't ask me to speak for half an hour." And Bentham took a deep pull at his soda-and-brandy, and subsided into his chair.

Bertie still sat pondering.

"I did like her awfully, Bentham—it's no use denying it—better than anything I had."

"Exactly; because, unlike everything you possessed, *she* was always just beyond your reach. 'The desire dieth when it is obtained,' as the cloak man—what's his name—Raleigh, said; and he was about right. Guy's behaved deuced badly—no doubt of it. A fellow doesn't expect that sort of thing from his brother. However, if you were a Corsican, or a woman, you needn't wish your vendetta to be in surer hands. By heaven! what a devil that woman could be."

Bertie made no answer—only contemplated the smoke of his cigar. He was thinking that there was much truth in what Bentham said.

"My visit is rather *à propos*, Bertie," continued Bentham. "I'm going for a yachting cruise—just the thing to pull you round, you know. The surest antidote to love is absence from the object. Change of scene, and all that. A month, coolness; two months, indifference; three months, complete forgetfulness. Come and try it?"

"I think I will. When do you sail?"

"In two or three days—don't matter much. The *Undine* is at Cowes. Charlie Lyall, Gus Vandeleur, Ormsby of the Coldstreams, and Lawson are going with us."

"Vandeleur? I thought he was going to marry that Bopkins girl with the snub nose and eighty thousand pounds. What will she do for her *cavalier servant?*"

"Do without him. He prefers *cavalier seul.* I think he wants to get out of it rather. Poor Gus! he was badly pressed, you know—couldn't raise another shilling the Israelites wouldn't do his paper at any price. Then he made a bad book on the Leger; lame duck altogether; and so Bop-

kins, *père et fille*, swooped down upon him. Old boy's made a fortune in pickled pork, salt junk, or something nautical—and wants a title for his daughter."

"So poor old Gus was bagged?"

"Yes, like the gonest coon. Old boy didn't seem to see it at first, though—wanted her to marry Sir Titus Gobble, tallow-chandler, knight and alderman; thought 'my lady' was grander than 'Mrs.,' even with the prefix 'Honourable.' However, the lovely Angelina preferred blue blood to colza oil, strawberry leaves to fourpenny dips, so papa gave in, and beauteous humility gained the day."

A few days later, Bentham's schooner-yacht, the *Undine*, with all his friends on board, was scudding before the wind under full sail off Ventnor.

"I can understand a man turning pirate," said Ormsby, who was of rather a poetic turn of mind; "the wild, adventurous life, the glorious excitement of all its dangers, the absence of restraint from the trammels of society, the proud sensation that you acknowledge no authority; above all, the feeling of freedom, must have made a man live, when before he only existed."

"I agree with you, Ormsby," said Vandeleur, lying back upon the deck, looking upwards meditatively. "It must have been delightful, no end, to snap your fingers at duns and women—to cruise about without the fear of being hooked and married, as you are burked and robbed, before you have any idea of what has happened."

"Rather awkward when they caught you, though," chimed in Lawson: "there's precious little romance in being hanged. Swinging at a yard-arm is scarcely a proud sensation, or one compatible with the feeling of freedom that Ormsby talks about."

"A man may run his head into a worse noose than a halter," said Vandeleur, gloomily.

"Why, Gus, you talk like a tract," laughed Bertie, settling himself on some cushions on the weather side of Bentham, who was at the tiller. "What's up, eh?—tell us all about it."

"Only don't be too gushing," added Bentham; "don't let your feelings carry you away."

Here, have a go in at claret-cup," said Ormsby. "Cool your head, you know—

raging fires, devouring flames, and all that. Devilish hot tipple, that cup of bliss, I should say! Couldn't you ice it?"

"If you'll give up chaffing, and 'lend me thine ears,' as the poet says, I'll tell you all about it."

After a deep draught from the bright silver tankard, he began:—

"I'll call my story 'Love's Young Dream; or, Caught in the Toils.' Give me a weed, Bertie. No doubt you've all heard of the approaching nuptials between my humble self and Miss Angelina Bopkins. I wont dwell on the lady's attractions; suffice it to say that they lay in her figure."

("Eighty thousand pounds, wasn't it?" put in Bentham, coolly.)

"Exactly so; rather than in any special beauty of face or form. I was strongly advised to marry, especially by my creditors. It was time that I settled, they said. Persuaded that they were serious, I considered the situation. There were three settlements open to me—a settlement with my creditors, Angelina's marriage settlements, or the settlement in Whitecross Street. I preferred the bonds of matrimony to those of a spunging-house—they are easier broken; so

I went in for Angelina. She smiled upon me; papa consented; the day was fixed; the trousseau was ordered, and old Time lagged on with sluggard steps——"

"Oh, cut that, Gus," groaned Ormsby. "Stick to Angelina."

"Of course he will," laughed Bentham, "till death doth them part."

"Don't interrupt," said Vandeleur. "We were full-blown *engagés*. Ugh! the life I led! Morning concerts in stifling rooms, where eighteen-stone chaperones melted visibly, and highly-chignoned music-mad young ladies came to hear 'that darling Santley,' or that 'sweet Mongini;' or crowded flower-shows, where well-dressed people hustled each other like London roughs. Oh, the fetch-and-carry time I had of it!"

"Poor old man!" said Bertie, with an air of mock commiseration. "Drop a tear, if it'll relieve you. We'll spare your feelings."

"Well, this sort of thing went on some time. I was thoroughly docile; my spirit was crushed—and so I gave great satisfaction. Angelina seemed proud of her conquest, and didn't forget to lead me vanquished before the multitude."

"What did your people say to it all, Gus?"

"Oh, the guv'nor kicked a good deal—always called old Bopkins 'the tallow-man,' talked of a stain on the escutcheon—a grease-spot my brother Dick called it, that would never come out. But as I was always considered the scamp of the family, they soon ceased to trouble themselves about it. My old aunt, Lady Cicely Plantagenet, behaved awfully well; thought it wasn't such a bad thing, after all; and as my own people wouldn't receive the Bopkinses, offered to take them up herself."

Vandeleur paused to take another drink of claret-cup, then continued:

"You know my aunt, Bentham—the most ultra-refined old dame alive. Nothing else like her since the last century. We were all at Paris in the spring. Aunt Cicely had some people to dinner, the De Courcys, Tom Berkeley from the Embassy, and one or two others, including Bopkins and his daughter. At dinner a *vol-au-vent* was served; there was something new about it—a great invention of the *chef's*, who knowing that some at least of the guests were noted gourmets, was anxious that it

should pass the ordeal of their criticism. It was a great success, De Courcy passed an elaborate judgment upon it, Berkeley vowed he would never rest until the Embassy had got the recipe, even old Bopkins thought it not so bad for a 'kickshaw' dish. 'What is your opinion of it, Miss Bopkins,' asked Lady Cicely. 'My opinion, Lady Cicely?' she replied; 'oh, I think it's very nice, but not half so good as *tripe and onions.*' Imagine the consternation of every one; old De Courcy dropped his knife and fork, stuck his eyeglass in his eye, and stared open-mouthed at her. Berkeley turned his head to speak to Blanche de Courcy, but I saw them both struggle to suppress a titter. Lady Cicely cast one look of consternation at me that made the blood rush to my temples. I would have been grateful if the floor had opened and swallowed me. Never shall I forget the torture of that moment! The next day I picked a quarrel with Angelina; it was a mean thing to do, I know, but what else could be done? I wrote a note saying that I thought our engagement had better end, as our *tastes* were different—and then I bolted;" and Vandeleur applied himself again to the claret-cup.

"By George, what an escape!" said Ormsby, in a serious voice.

"What did they do?" asked Bentham.

"Heaven knows. I haven't shown myself much since; hang me if I'm not afraid; if some dun doesn't catch me some woman will, and so I mean to keep clear of both. Hand over another weed."

Very pleasantly the time passed on board the *Undine*. A week round the south-west coast, and then up channel, and a cruise to Norway and back filled up the time to the first of September, on which day Bertie was due at Erlesmere for the shooting. The constant change of scene, the genial society, and the excitement of this yachting expedition wrought a great change in him. Bentham was right when he foretold that time and absence would be fatal to any lingering affection that Bertie might cherish for Estelle.

He was much depressed at times it is true, and then he would swallow brandy, glass after glass, until Bentham looked grave, although as host he could not well remonstrate. Bertie's spirits rose with stimulants, and he joined heart and soul in the rollicking bohemianism of the life, becoming more and

more convinced that he had nothing to regret; that the loss of freedom, the social restraint of married life, were sacrifices far too great to offer on the hymeneal altar; that no bait, however tempting, that no prize, however dazzling, should induce a man to throw away his liberty.

But as he thought all this, day after day, slowly but surely he was becoming more enslaved to a tyrant more insatiable, more fatal to freedom of thought and action, than the most exacting mistress that ever lived —to the demon drink.

It was a warm September night at Erlesmere—Bertie and his friends were in the stately old drawing-room, lounging indolently on couches, or seated at card-tables, which had been introduced.

There had been a battue that day—a sickening slaughter of the innocents; for the birds, unmolested during the previous season, had grown quite tame, and allowed themselves unsuspectingly to be driven to their fate. Everybody seemed pleased with his day's sport. Champagne passed freely; the talk grew louder and more general, and the play became higher and more reckless.

A small group had collected round one of

the card tables where Bertie and a man called Peyton were playing *écarté*.

The game had not lost any of its old fascination for Bertie, especially as he prided himself on his skill at it. But his opponent was worthy of his mettle, for a cooler, more finished *écarté* player than Morley Peyton never turned a king,

Luck was dead against Bertie—provokingly so: and he was beginning to show annoyance—a fatal failing in a card-player. Considerable sums had been staked, most of the lookers-on were anxious to back the winning seat, and Bertie, with his natural recklessness, and believing that the luck must turn, took bet after bet, thinking that by a few lucky *coups* he might regain his losses.

"There is no playing against you to-night, Peyton," he said, as his opponent scored another game; "that makes a hundred and twenty—play you one more game for fifty."

"Done!" said Peyton.

"Same again, Vandeleur?" asked Bertie.

"Yes, of course," drawled Gus, taking a cigarette from his mouth.

"You're rash to back yourself, Deverell," said Ormsby, sauntering up: "lucky in love, unlucky at play; and if a woman's eyes can

speak, that fair rustic I saw you with this morning was playing Marguerite to your Faust."

Bertie smiled.

"What's that, Ormsby?" cried Vandeleur. "A woman? Didn't know there was such a thing down here."

"Who was she, Bertie?" asked Bentham. "Some fair Rosamond of yours, who had strayed away from her clematis-clad bower? Some golden-haired, peach-bloomed, bright-eyed Daphne, as the novels have it; or some broad-hoofed, rosy-cheeked, snub-nosed dairy-maid?"

"Some covey you have flushed in the Erlesmere preserves, eh, Bertie?" chimed in Lyall: "keep an eye on Ormsby, or he'll poach your game."

"By the bye, speaking of poachers," said Lawson, who had just woke up from a doze, "Griffiths, your under-keeper tells me that, thanks to your brother Guy's *laisser aller* ways, Erlesmere is infested with them. Why don't you do something in the matter."

"Don't speak to me now, there's a good fellow," replied Bertie, as he played a card.

"What was that, Lawson?" asked Bentham, turning to him.

"Only that there are nine or ten ruffians who make a living out of Lawrence's pheasants; bag 'em no end. Send cart-loads to market."

"The deuce!"

"It seems that there's a fellow at the head of them called Smithers—a farmer in the village."

A burst of exclamations which rose from the group at the card-table interrupted Lawson. "Well played, Bertie; near thing, by Jove!" from all. "Lucky you played the club;" and everyone became absorbed in the game.

"Your deal, Peyton; bar a king being turned, I'll back myself for a pony."

"Put it down, by all means."

"Again?" asked Brandon.

"Yes," replied Bertie, and the bet was booked several times over.

The cards were dealt. Bertie held the queen, another trump, two kings, and a ten. He stood on his hand. Peyton had knave, ten, and seven of trumps, a small card, and an ace.

The play went on. They were two tricks each, Bertie to play; his card was the ten of hearts, Peyton's was the ace; he took the trick, and won the game.

"'Gad! what luck!" "Hard lines, by George!" "Never saw anything like it!" Such ejaculations followed. Bertie bit his lip to suppress his annoyance. He knew he had lost heavy sums on the evening—much heavier than he could really afford to pay; but beyond a slight paleness, and an almost imperceptible tremor of his hand as he lifted a tumbler of brandy-and-seltzer to his lips, he made no outward sign.

"I've had enough of it to-night," he said, rising from the table; "you fellows can tell me what I owe you, I suppose? Haven't kept account. What's the time?"

"Half-past three," yawned Lawson; "and as we're going to shoot through Palmer's Spinnies to-morrow, I vote we turn in."

"Well thought of, Lawson," laughed Ormsby, slapping him on the shoulder; "you're the only man here who ever thinks of going to bed, and if it weren't for you, by George! I believe we should forget the blessed haven of rest altogether—never press a pillow at all."

Bertie had gone to his room. He felt giddy; his head was fevered with excitement and drink. So opening his window, he drew up a lounging-chair, and throwing

himself into it, lighted a cigarette, and looked out into the night.

Night! It was morning rather, and the dark coppices of the home-park stood out in strong relief against the cold grey sky. The freshness of the air seemed to reinvigorate his jaded senses, and the sweet perfume of the dew-laden flowers beneath his window seemed to tempt him to wander amongst them.

Donning a thick shooting-jacket, he descended the stairs and went out. He sauntered on and on, thinking—as all men think in the stillness of solitude—of his past, present, and future, striving to shake off the depression which the thought of his embarrassments caused him, feeling now and then a pang of remorse at his ill-requital of Guy's generosity.

"Heaven knows what I should have done without him!" he thought; "he has always paid my debts without a murmur—treated me devilish handsomely—there's not a doubt about it. Gives me *carte blanche* here, so that I can almost fancy the place is my own. But there's that affair of Celia's—" and he paused a moment in his thoughts—"after all, I wonder whether he really did it to

save me from a scrape, as he said he did? Guy never told a lie to any man, and I almost begin to think that I'm better out of it. What a deuce of a mess I'm in with money matters too; if Guy doesn't give me a leg up——" His reflections were cut short by the report of a gun that sounded clearly and loudly in the still morning air, not more than sixty or eighty yards from him. He had wandered into the thickest of the coppice, where the trees and underwood impeded every step. Bertie stopped suddenly, and an angry frown settled on his face.

"Those poaching scoundrels!" he muttered.

He pushed on through the straggling furze till at last he heard the sound of broken branches on the further side of a small open space completely surrounded by closely-growing trees.

Concealing himself behind a broad-trunked elm, Bertie waited. The next moment the thickly-entwined saplings were pushed aside and a man came into view. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, powerfully-built fellow of forty or thereabouts, with a villanous-looking head set on a thick bull-dog throat. He was dressed in a common

blackened suit of fustian and a hare-skin peakless cap. A ragged shirt left unbuttoned, and a yellow silk handkerchief, very much begrimed, was tied loosely, so as to bare his brawny throat. Altogether he was the type of low ruffianism—as ill-conditioned a looking brute as ever ginned a hare.

As he stepped out into the open space he held in one hand a double-barrelled gun, in the other a pheasant. He had thrown the bird on the ground, and was about to load the fowling-piece, when Bertie stood before him.

"Give me that gun."

There was a calm determination in Bertie's voice that was scarcely habitual to him.

The poacher stepped back a pace, then leaning on the muzzle of his piece and coolly surveying Bertie, he answered insolently, "Thank ye; if it's all the same, I'd rather keep it."

A frown gathered on Bertie's face.

"Do you know who I am?—I should imagine not."

"Oh yes, I know you well enough—you're Mister Dev'rell from the 'ouse yonder."

"Then you know you're poaching."

"Poaching be damned! Pheasants were meant for one man as much as another. You swells keep 'em for the fun of shooting 'em, when poor devils like me mustn't take 'em for the sake of food—no, damn yer, though we're starving. One man's as good as another, and——"

"Silence," cried Bertie, in a loud imperious tone that cowed the fellow, ruffian though he was. "You shall answer for this, I promise you. For the present give me that gun and bird."

"Come and take 'em;" and throwing the fowling-piece by the side of the pheasant, he proceeded to take off his coat and roll up his shirt-sleeves.

"I will."

To glance at the two men, the chances of a hand-to-hand fight seemed fearfully disproportionate. One the picture of brutal strength, the other with his elegant, slimly-built figure, his small white hands and his Antinous-like head, looking like a David about to encounter a Goliath, or an Adonis standing defiantly before a Hercules. But a practised eye would have seen much power in Bertie's seemingly delicate figure. His great breadth of shoulder; the development of the

muscles by constant exercise in field sports, which his short course of dissipation had not yet destroyed; and the cold, proud look of scorn that showed the dogged courage of his race that would never know defeat.

Bertie, like all young men of his order, had gone through the usual pugilistic training at Eton, and in the inevitable water-side encounters had come victorious from many hard-fought battles against terrific odds.

As he put himself in attitude, his head well back, his left arm straightened, his eyes flashing, a supercilious, confident smile on his lips, but a cruel-looking frown on his brow, he looked worthy to do battle even against the brute beast he was about to grapple.

The poacher attacked him, hitting furiously right and left, intending to make short work of his antagonist, whom he evidently scorned; but finding his blows did not reach home, with an angry growl he threw out his fist like a sledge-hammer, aiming at Bertie's head; but he had held his opponent too cheaply, for Bertie, stepping quickly on one side, planted his fist with all his force behind the fellow's left ear, as he staggered forward with the im-

petus of his blow, bringing him down as if he had been shot.

The man got up, gave a snort of passion, and with a fierce oath rushed furiously at Bertie. The brutal ferocity of the ruffian was now completely aroused, and he struck out blindly with all his force. But as he grew wilder, Bertie became more cool, and though blood was pouring freely from the poacher's face, his antagonist showed no greater signs of punishment than a slight cut on the upper lip.

Bertie now saw that it was time to deal the *coup de grace;* so, altering his tactics, and forcing the fighting for the first time, he feigned with his left, and as the fellow lifted his guard, threw out his right with all his force, landing on the poacher's brawny throat with a sickening thud, and bringing him down like a felled ox. He lay for a few moments as if he were dead, then opened his eyes and looked wildly about him, until catching sight of Bertie, he raised himself to a sitting posture.

"You're a game 'un, by G—— you are!" he growled, as he tore off his handkerchief and tried to stanch the blood that was flowing from his nose and mouth. "There's

not another man in Sloughborough could 'a chawed me up as you 'ave. Now what are you going to do with me?" And getting up, he stood in a dogged, sullen manner before Bertie. Bertie was of far too indolent a nature to relish the prospect of dancing attendance on an Assize Court as prosecutor in a poaching case. Moreover, he considered the man had received sufficient punishment already.

"If I let you off, will you promise never to poach again?"

The man's face brightened.

"Let me off, Mr. Dev'rell, and I'll never poach again; strike me dead, if I do!"

There was something in the man's tone that made Bertie believe him.

"I'll take your word; but remember for the future that a man's game is as much his property, and should be held as sacred by others, as anything he has. Now go." And Bertie waved his hand with a commanding gesture, and turned on his heel.

"Let me speak to you a moment, sir."

Bertie turned, and looked at the man. The sullenness had left him, and a look of indignation gleamed in his eyes.

"What do you want with me?"

"You say that a man's game is his property—the birds that fly about wild-like—and that they should be 'eld sacred—that means that nobody shouldn't touch 'em, I suppose? Now, sir, what about a man's daughter—his child that he fed and brought up from a baby—ain't she his property? Has anybody else the right to rob him of her? Is a pheasant or a partridge or a hare of more account than a woman? Tell me that, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this, Mister Dev'rell," replied the poacher with angry vehemence, clenching his huge fist and bringing it down violently in his open palm—"that some infernal villain is trying to rob me of my girl—my only child, my little Rosie, curse him!—and it's one of your friends too—one of them swells up at the 'ouse. If he comes within reach of my arm, God 'elp him; for I'd brain him with my sledge-'ammer as I would a dog that had bit me."

Where is the man so utterly debased that no spark of goodness exists in him? It may be hidden, almost extinguished, by the rough hard incrustations of depravity—it may be never kindled, but though none

may dream of its existence, though none may see its outward signs, depend upon it it is there.

This man, ruffian though he was, loved his bright-eyed, motherless child with a tenderness that seemed to give the lie to his brutal nature—that seemed almost to ennoble him as he stood there swearing vengeance on the man who would do her wrong.

"What is your name?"

"Smithers—Bob Smithers, farrier; and my little girl is Rosie Smithers—the rose of Sloughborough, as the neighbours call her."

Bertie shrugged his shoulders haughtily.

"I can't concern myself about your domestic affairs—you'll do what you please in such matters. But for the future remember to keep out of Erlesmere—your next visit will probably lead to transportation," and turning on his heel he sauntered slowly back toward the house.

"Rosie's father," he muttered as he once more regained his room; "*tant mieux*—if anything did come of it, I hold him in my grip at all events."

CHAPTER VII.

LIFE was very pleasant at Erlesmere. Long days amongst the "rocketers," luncheons under the beeches, amongst the sweet-scented thyme and the wild-growing ferns, with the *sauce piquante* of ravenous appetites, and the exhilarating addition of champagne cup. Later on, mornings with the foxhounds,—cub-hunting, afternoons in the billiard-room, and evenings at *ecarté*, *lansquenet*, or whist. Liberty reigned supreme, and this it was that made things so enjoyable. Dinner was the only formal meal, and even then the absence of one or two of the party occasioned little or no remark: they had run up to London perhaps, or driven over to some neighbouring town—nobody knew exactly—nobody cared in the least.

And so it was that Bertie's frequent absence passed unnoticed. Once or twice he had been seen, and not alone, sauntering

through some distant coppice in the home-park; but a rustic gallantry was such an ordinary occurrence to men of his set, that beyond the usual "chaff" and somewhat dubious insinuations to which it sometimes led, no one troubled himself about the movements of his host.

And so days and weeks passed on. The hunting season had commenced, and as two or three packs met within easy distance of Erlesmere, most of Bertie's friends accepted his invitation to remain, by no means anxious to quit such quarters. Bertie went up to town and remained there for several days—detained on business, he said. Very urgent business he found it to be—for creditors will not be always satisfied with promises—but his absence made little difference, and was scarcely remarked amongst them.

It was the day after his return.

Lawson, Vandeleur, and Lyall were "gunning," Bertie and the others in the billiard-room, playing pool.

"Going to shoot to-morrow, Bertie?" asked Ormsby, throwing himself on a lounge after making his stroke.

"Oh no; by the bye, Woodthorpe sent over to say there'll be a private meet at

Bingley woods. Southdown, Billy Delacour, and the De Vere girls, and a lot of people from Cheshurst are going—rather good fun, I expect."

"And hard riding too, if Connie De Vere's in the field. She's 'a hard 'un to follow, a bad 'un to beat,' as the song says. I'm glad Sir Douglas is fit again. What shall you ride, Bertie?"

"Bonnie Belle."

"You mean to be in the first flight then: that Bonnie Belle's a splendid mare. By the way, didn't you buy her of Tommy White?"

"Yes, gave two hundred for her, and she's worth it every shilling. She's as good as Rattlesnake, without his temper. I shall find her rather fresh though, I expect."

Then as Vandeleur and Lyall appeared at the garden door, "Hallo, you fellows! what sport? where's Lawson?"

"Hasn't he turned up?" asked Vandeleur, seizing a Moselle cup, and taking a deep draught.

"No."

"Don't know anything about him then. I left him beating a turnip-field for partridges. Isn't it nearly dinner-time? I'm awfully hungry!"

A few minutes later a view halloa sounded from the lawn, and the next moment Lawson appeared.

"Thought he wouldn't miss feeding-time," said Bentham, with a laugh. "What's made you so late, Lawson?"

"I've had an adventure," answered Lawson, as he threw himself full length on a cushioned bench that was fitted round the room. "A real romance and mystery sort of affair."

"The deuce you have!"

"Yes, quite melodramatic—give you my honour. I'll tell you how it was. I had come a short cut, and was just breaking cover from Cotteswold Spinnies when I saw a man dodging behind the trees; he hadn't heard me coming, so I watched him. Leaning against a tree he looked in the direction of the house a few minutes, then muttering something I could not catch, shook his clenched fist at it, and turning on his heel began to walk away."

By this time all were listening to Lawson's recital.

"He was up to no good, of course, so as he approached I stood before him. 'Who are you, and what do you want here?' I

said. 'My name's Bob Smithers,' he said, folding his arms and glaring in my face. 'Now you can guess what I want.' 'Unless you want transportation as a poacher I am quite at a loss,' I answered. When I said this the fellow positively walked up and looked me in the face, scowling like the very deuce. 'When is *he* coming back?' he said, pointing to the house; 'you know who I mean. I'll make sure of him, if I swing for it; so let him look to himself, damn him.' And turning abruptly he hurried away."

"What the deuce was he driving at?" said Ormsby, through a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Can't say exactly," continued Lawson; "for a moment I stood quite still—took my breath away, I assure you. Then I thought I'd follow the fellow and find out what it all meant; but it was of no use, he had disappeared. I couldn't find him anywhere."

"The brute was vowing vengeance for his thrashing," said Lyall. "Tell you what, Bertie," he added, "better look out for squalls, *mon ami;* those scoundrels sometimes keep their word, and a blow from a bludgeon, or a 'pot' shot from behind a tree wouldn't

be a pleasant dénouement to this romance of Lawson's. Well played, Bentham! A sovereign red divides!"

And so the topic was dismissed, and not alluded to again that evening.

* * * * *

The clock in the old ivy-grown tower had just tolled one, awakening no echo in the still, clear night. All had retired early, in anticipation of the morning's meet at Bingley woods, a good fourteen miles from Erlesmere, and Bertie sat in his room, smoking a cigar and reading some newly-published novel.

But though he held the book open before him, his thoughts would continually wander away from its pages.

"What could the scoundrel mean? Pshaw! empty threat, nothing more. Suppose he's heard of my little walks with Rosie. What if he has? There's no sin in talking to a pretty girl, and there's no harm done—more thanks to her, by the bye, than to me. Who would have given the little thing credit for so much prudery? It was as well that Lawson and those other fellows set it down to the poaching affair—it wouldn't do to tell

them about her—they would all be running after her. Poor little Rosie! how pretty she is, with her laughing blue eyes, how innocent, how good! How anxious she will be to see me again—daresay she wonders what has become of me. I'll look her up to-morrow I think, and then—and then——"

And then his reflections made him drowsy, the book dropped from his hand, extinguishing the candle, and he fell asleep.

The clock chimed half-past two, and Bertie woke with a start, shivering with cold in that dark room, for a moment unconscious where he was. Rising from his chair he was about to strike a light, when suddenly he started—there was an oppressive smell of burning wood, and he was dimly conscious that the room was filling with smoke. Hastily lighting his candle, he rushed out and tore down the old oaken staircase. The smell of burning became stronger and stronger; smoke was rolling along the corridor from the direction of the library. Never pausing for a moment, Bertie sped on, and seizing the door, tore it open; but he staggered back at the sight that presented itself. The room was in flames. On the

centre of the floor was a black patch of charred straw, that clearly showed the origin of the fire. It was the work of an incendiary; so well had the miscreant done his work too, that already the flames had taken firm hold of the room; the curtains and everything inflammable were ablaze. It was evident that in a few minutes the whole place would be a raging fire.

Not a second was to be lost—Bertie saw that at a glance. Rushing into the hall, he seized the dinner-bell which stood there, and rang it lustily, shouting loudly for help at the same time. In a moment everything was in a state of uproar—half-clad figures rushing frantically about, white-robed maid-servants screaming with terror, as they caught sight of the thick volumes of smoke that rolled through the open door of the staircase; everybody shouting directions and making a noise that added to the confusion.

Bertie paused only a moment to cast one look at the flames, then seeing that nothing could be done to arrest their progress, and being the only one dressed, rushed out of the house to seek extraneous help.

There were fire-engines at Sloughborough, but that was six miles by the road from

Erlesmere—there was a shorter cut across the fields, but it was over a stiff line of country and an awkward flight even when following fox-hounds. But Bertie did not hesitate; the greatest dangers, the most imminent personal risks had no terror for him, and his great physical courage stood him in good stead now, for it kept his brain cool, and he acted with judgment, exciting as the moment was.

Rushing to the stables, he opened the door and entered. In a loose box, on the panels of which her name was emblazoned in letters of gold, stood Bonnie Belle in all the majestic dignity of a thorough-bred crack, on a straw bed that would have made many a pauper envious, and carefully wrapped in clothing embroidered with her owner's monogram.

Bertie hastily struck a fusee that he had in his pocket and lighted a stable lantern; then looking about him, he saw a pair of groom's spurs hanging on a nail. He strapped one on and then turned to the mare.

Bonnie Belle knew his voice, and so submitted to her nocturnal toilet with a very good grace.

Bertie was so well versed in all the mysteries of stable craft, that a very few minutes sufficed for him to put a saddle and bridle on her and lead her out of the stables.

Very beautiful she looked—as far as she could be seen in the gloom—the pink of condition, her coat shining like satin in the moonlight; but Bertie did not stay to contemplate her. Vaulting into the saddle, he rode off, out of the stable yard, down the avenue, through the park gates, and into the road. He turned his head to take one last look at the burning Hall, and then pressed on.

Coming to a gap in the roadside hedge, he burst through it, and turned the mare's head in a direct line to Sloughborough.

And now the gallant mare nobly answers the call that Bertie makes upon her, skimming the ground at a terrific pace, as though she knows how much depends upon her speed! She seems almost to fly in her mad gallop as she strides over ridge and furrow, grass-field and stubble; so tremendous is the pace that the air seems to brush Bertie's cheeks like a cold wind as she tears along. Away they go like the legendary Herne on his phantom steed, and horse and rider seem

to share the excitement of their nocturnal flight. Away, over hedge and ditch, water and timber, the gallant brute clearing every obstacle without a pause in her magnificent stride. Now the faint sound of a distant shout is wafted to Bertie on the still night air, and as he guesses that it tells of some fresh havoc that the flames are doing, he presses his spur to the rowel in the brave mare's flanks, as if her splendid pace seemed sluggish to his impatience.

On they gallop, madly, the owls and bats circling round them as they speed across the moonlit fields. Now flying an "oxer," now breasting a hedge from which the feathered occupants fly out with an unearthly caw or screech that gives both horse and rider a weird-like air. Strange they look, tearing across country at that fearful pace; Bertie, bare-headed, his pale face looking paler in the blue-tinted moonlight, coaxing and urging his foam-flecked steed. And now, as they reach the crest of a hill, the spire of Sloughborough church is seen standing in distinct relief against the clear blue sky; but not a light or sign of life is visible at so late an hour in the staid and sober-minded little town. There is not far to go

now: another mile and Bertie will draw rein at the Sloughborough engine-house.

Away he gallops, the gallant mare beginning to show slight signs of the terrific pace; and now a dark obstacle appears before them, becoming more distinct as they approach, and proving to be a stiffly-grown blackthorn fence, with a five-foot "yawner" on each side. Bertie casts a hasty glance to left and right, but no gate or gap shows an opening. A few more strides, and sitting down firmly in his saddle, he lifts Bonnie Belle to the leap; her mettle is up, and she rises like a bird, clearing everything. Away again across two more fields, along a short level road, and into the town, the mare's iron hoofs sounding with a ringing clatter on the stones; another minute, and Bertie draws rein outside the engine-house. The man on duty is asleep. A fire at Sloughborough is such an unusual occurrence that when he wakes with a start at the continual ringing of the sonorous bell, he rubs his eyes for a moment in bewildered astonishment.

Bertie's impatient shouts, however, soon bring him to his senses, and after opening the gates and hearing that Erlesmere is on

fire, he speedily summons his companions, and in a few minutes the bright red engine, with its blazing lamps and its helmeted firemen, are thundering out of Sloughborough. But Bertie has gone before them, taking the same cross-country line, the lurid glare in the distance showing him the direction; for the burning Hall may now be seen for miles round, reddening the sky and making it look like the reflected sunlight of early dawn.

Bertie was within half a mile of home, and was galloping at full speed down a narrow lane, when suddenly a man sprung out of a coppice that skirted it on one side, and placed himself in his path. So sudden, so unexpected was the apparition, that the mare swerved and then reared on her haunches, almost throwing Bertie from the saddle.

The man's face was turned to the moonlight. Bertie easily recognised him—it was Smithers. A look of savage exultation gleamed in his eyes, as he motioned Bertie to stop.

"Not so fast, Mr. Dev'rell," he cried with an oath. "Me and you've got a score to settle to-night."

Bertie shook the reins to press past him.

"Stand aside, fellow," he shouted, "if you don't wish to be ridden over."

But the man sprang forward and seized the mare's head.

"No, no: you must listen to me. Look ye there," and he turned and pointed to the blazing Hall. "Before to-morrow there'll only be ruins where your fine house stood. What do you think of that, eh? Ah! you begin to grind your teeth and look savage now. Ha! ha! that's better!"

"What do you mean, you scoundrel?"

"Mean?" and he yelled the words rather than spoke them. "Mean? why, that I did that little job for you! *I* set the Hall on fire!"

"You?"

"Yes, me!" and he glared with a look of fiendish desperation. "*You* know what I did it for, curse you! You've taken away my poor little gal. You know that she went away two or three days ago, and ain't been heard on since. Will you tell me it wasn't with you? What have you done with her—where have you taken her? You know all about it fast enough. I'll take my oath you've been all laughing about it and thinking it a good joke—you and your fine

friends up there—cowardly hounds! May they burn like rats in a hole! A good joke to send her to hell—that's what you think it!"

The man paused for a moment, exhausted by his fury. Bertie's face grew white as death.

"You dare to tell me that this is your doing! What do I know of your daughter? What has it to do with me whether she has left you or not? By heaven! you shall answer for this!"

"Do ye expect me to believe them lies?" interrupted the man with a hoarse laugh. "You as went away the same time as she did—you as was always a talking and a fooling of her—more shame to them as told me nothing of it till it were too late—not too late to pay yer off though! I swore I'd do it. Ay! yer may lag me for it and get me a lifer if yer can: I don't care—what's the odds now, yer——"

Blind with passion, Bertie leant forward and raised his whip, but the man letting go his hold of the reins with a sudden jerk which caused the mare to swerve, sprang into the coppice and escaped the blow. For a moment Bertie tried to follow, but the

brushwood and low growing trees made it utterly impossible to do so on horseback. Should he leave his horse, and following on foot endeavour to prevent the man's escape? He paused, irresolute. A hundred thoughts came rushing into his head. What could he say to Guy about this fire? He dreaded meeting him, for he knew how dear the old house was to him; but Guy was just, and however great his grief might be he would not blame him for that which was the result of an accident, and caused by no fault of his. But what if Guy knew all? He felt that he could not bear to see him, and tell him that this fire was caused, however indirectly, through his own folly.

True, he knew nothing of Rosie's absence. She was safe as far as he knew. But if the poacher were tried, and the girl perhaps cross-examined by some shrewd attorney, it might come out that that was due rather to her virtue than to his principle.

And Guy would blame him—would know that another great disaster had been caused by his short-comings. Better to let the man go than to let Guy think that. After all, what was to be gained by his conviction?

Weakly hesitating, feeling that it was

impossible to take the blame in any way on himself, Bertie lost all chance, if he ever had any, of preventing Smithers' escape. After peering vainly for any trace of him through the darkness of the coppice, he gave up all idea of following him, and turning the mare's head, galloped on towards the burning Hall.

A terrible sight for him when he dismounted on the lawn! The house was one mass of flame, for the fire had made terrible progress while he had been away, in spite of all the efforts of his friends and the crowd of villagers that had collected since the alarm was given. There was plenty of water to be had, and no lack of heroic efforts to turn it to account, Bertie's friends, with the contempt for danger that generally goes with dilettanteism, setting an example that many of the bolder villagers followed. But though Bentham, Ormsby, and the others risked death from suffocation, flames and falls from dizzy heights, the bucketfuls of water that they poured on the burning mass had no effect, and room after room caught fire until the whole became one enormous blaze.

The engine had not come up yet, but its gleaming lamps could be seen winding

through the lanes like fire-flies shining through the darkness. In a few minutes it would be on the scene, but too late, alas! to save the fine old mansion from its doom.

Bertie saw that nothing could be done, that all human efforts would be fruitless, and so he stood with the others, looking on, waiting for the end.

It was terrible work watching the old home in its downfall, seeing all its cherished relics swallowed by the flames, without the power to snatch them from destruction. An awful sight, sublime in its grandeur;—the fierce flames as they rushed upwards encircling the tottering rafters, devouring all that came within their deadly embrace.

Suddenly, a puff of wind dispersed the smoke, and Bertie saw the portrait of his mother, a splendid picture by Watts, hanging in the drawing-room, untouched by the fire, as if contemptuous of the flames. His pulse quickened, and his heart leapt wildly, as the thought came to him that it might be saved; but before an effort could be made the canvas was in a blaze, and all that remained was the burning frame. And then the shouts of the firemen sounded above the roar of the flames and the din of

the crowd, as the engine came thundering up the avenue. No time was lost, the hose was fixed, and a dozen sturdy labourers began to pump with all their strength and will.

The water made a hissing, cracking noise as it fell upon the burning mass, and clouds of smoke rolled upward in dense black columns; but the flames rose higher and higher, fiercer and fiercer, as if defying the power of their antagonistic element. The ceilings one by one fell in, and the roof became exposed to all the fury of the fire, the dry old wood of which it was built burning like tinder. Nothing but the walls were left, but still they worked determinedly, unceasingly, to try to save even them.

Presently a blazing rafter fell, then another. A cry of "the roof!" was raised, and every one hurried back a few paces. For a few minutes the excitement was intense; the roof swayed as if struggling in the grip of its destroyer, and then fell with a crash that rent the air like thunder, raising clouds of sparks that filled the air as thickly as the flakes in a storm of snow.

It was all over; the fire had spent its fury, and would now exhaust itself. The

worst had come to pass; and Erlesmere, the seat of the Lawrences for centuries past—where kings had feasted, where beauteous dames and gallant knights had held high revel—was now a blackened mass of charred and burning ruin—a thing of the past.

A few days later, Guy, who had been summoned by a telegram from Bertie, stood alone silently regarding the scene of the catastrophe. There was an almost unbearable anguish upon him in this hour, when he looked on the ruins of the inheritance of his fathers—the old house that from generation to generation had been the home of his race—and knew that no time, no pains, no money could ever restore it as it had been. As his eyes dwelt on the utter desolation that lay before him, his face grew white, his heart sickened, and his head sank on his breast in almost uncontrollable grief.

A flood of old memories swept over him. There his gentle mother had lived her peaceful life; there he had seen Kitty Lorton flitting from room to room. Every nook, every cranny in the rambling oak galleries, had been replete with associations

of a time that was gone for ever; there he had spent the light-hearted happy days of childhood, there his love had dawned and strengthened, there he had suffered as he had never thought to suffer again; and he clung with desperate tenacity to all the memories connected with a time which had been so sweet and yet so bitter. He had been content to hide himself away in foreign lands, to let his life die out from the world where he had once been known, content to give himself up to oblivion, even to the slander and reproach which he knew must attach to his name; but he had always thought regretfully and lovingly of the old home, and now even that was swept from the face of the earth. The last descendant of the Lawrences was now an alien from the land of his fathers, and his birthright a blackened ruin!

He ascended the shattered, crumbling steps of the terrace that had once led up to the old oak door, and there he paused and surveyed the chaos that lay within the walls that were yet standing. Here was a broken piece of a rare old china cup; there the flame-scorched head of a marble statue, at his feet great shapeless masses of corru-

gated metal that he knew had once been the armour of the old knights and squires of Erlesmere; further on, a portion of delicate Roman mosaic, the remains of a table he had brought to his mother from Italy, which had by some strange chance escaped; and standing alone, weird and gaunt, erect among the costly débris, a part of the inner wall, and hanging upon it the charred remains of half a frame and a picture with the face of some old ancestor peering grimly through a mist of darkness. Guy turned away. He could not bear to look upon the utter destruction that had come upon all the old relics, and all the things that his mother had loved and valued, so without one backward look strode hastily from the scene of the disaster. And yet all this while no sign of anger, no word of reproach against Bertie had escaped him.

"Have you no idea how the fire originated?" he had asked him the morning he arrived. "An accident, of course?"

"No one can be more terribly vexed about it than I am," answered Bertie, unwilling to tell a direct lie, yet feeling how impossible it was to speak out and tell Guy all the truth. "I would have given every-

thing I possess rather than it should have happened while the house was in my charge."

"You mustn't take it to heart, Bertie," answered Guy, kindly, "you couldn't help it. But one is always anxious to trace a disaster of this kind to its cause."

"I can't see that it can do much good now," muttered Bertie.

"You were the first to discover the fire, weren't you? Do you know where it began?"

"In the library, I fancy; but the smoke was too dense to see much," answered Bertie, turning his back to Guy and looking out of the window.

And Guy, fearing that Bertie should think the blame rested on him, asked no more questions; and no suspicion of the truth, no doubt as to the accidental origin of the fire, ever crossed his mind.

There was of course much discussion about it among the village folks, as well as among Bertie's friends, but the fact that Bertie had been the first to discover the fire, and that he and Guy—the two whom it most concerned—ascribed it to some accident, one of those which can neither be foreseen

nor accounted for afterwards, prevented any approach to the truth—and Bob Smithers escaped detection and remained unsuspected to the last day of his life.

CHAPTER VIII.

VERY soon after his marriage Guy Lawrence had taken a rambling low-roofed villa that stood in a sequestered nook a little way out of Naples, and there he and his wife were living in the strictest seclusion.

One brilliant, cloudless day towards the end of July, in the year following the burning of Erlesmere, Guy was seated by an open window, lying back in his chair, and gazing dreamily at the landscape that was stretched before him, seeing it and yet not seeing it—the quiet grandeur of the scene filling him with a dim consciousness of peace and repose, even while his thoughts wandered far away.

To some, sorrow acts as an irritant, goading them into perpetual motion; to others as a sedative—a draught of morphia, lulling them into apathy and dulness of spirit—a ghastly parody on real calm and peace.

So Guy went on the even tenor of his way, living a quiet, aimless life, sufficiently happy to all appearance, and yet so utterly crushed and heart-broken that life had lost all its sweetness for him.

But he was tolerably content that it should be so. It is not given to every man to be happy, and though at times a revolt against the hardness of his fate would come upon him, the fact that that which he had done had proved successful prevented him from regretting it.

Even his last great disaster—the burning of Erlesmere—had not been altogether without its good results. Bertie's regrets and self-reproaches had for the time obliterated all feelings of animosity. The recriminations, the reproaches in which he had—naturally enough—indulged at the time of Guy's marriage had been forgotten. His passion for Celia changed into complete indifference—all the past and its misunderstandings buried between them. They had never been better friends than they were now. Nothing more—no gratitude for his life-long sacrifice did Guy expect. He was perfectly content with the present state of things between himself and his brother.

True he would have been glad to hear more of Bertie's doings during the past year. His letters to Guy—exiled and nearly forgotten in his foreign home—were few and far between; but though they contained little news of himself, the tone of them was affectionate.

In the midst of his reverie Celia entered—Celia the actress, playing the rôle of young English wife, her brilliancy toned down by the extreme simplicity of her white morning dress—and coming towards him, put a letter into his hand.

"A letter for you, Guy, from England," she said, noting the eagerness with which he took it, and the disappointment in his face, as he scanned the handwriting on the envelope.

"It is not from Bertie then?"

"No," he answered, tearing it open, and she, still watching him, saw his face pale suddenly.

It was from Saunders—Bertie's man, and ran thus:—

"Jermyn Street, July 18th."

"HONNERED SIR,—I take the liberty of ritin unbeknone to Mister Bertie, wich is very bad and now lade up and ravin' orful, wich

it's no use a beatin about the Bush, Mister Guy is D. T., therefore thort, honnered Sir, as i had better rite and tell you that he had broke down, wich i always thort, askin' your pardon Sir he could never stay the pace he was a goin.

"Your 'umble servant to command,

"THOMAS SAUNDERS.

"P.S.—Sir, i got your adres from Mister Bentham, and if it does not reech you, Honnered Sir, please send for it. "T. S."

"What is it, sposo mio?" said Celia, tenderly, kneeling by his side. "Something in that letter has troubled you."

Guy started up hurriedly, shaking her off in his impatience.

"Yes, yes, Bertie is ill—very ill, and I must go to England immediately."

"Go to England!" echoed Celia, in dismay. But he hurried from the room without noticing her, and meeting the servant in the doorway, she heard him order the carriage to be sent round and his portmanteau packed, with the greatest haste.

When he returned, she was standing by

the window, looking forth as he had looked, but there was an expression on her face, a weary hopelessness that gave him an acute pang of self-reproach, as he felt how far his love for his brother was beyond his love for his wife.

He took her hands and drew her towards him.

"Celia, will you forgive me for leaving you? Bertie may be on his death-bed. If I stayed here, and he were to die, I should feel that I had betrayed a solemn trust. I will come back soon."

She loved him so well still, that a few kind words could drive away the shadow from her face, could even for the moment drive away the bitter thought that in spite of all she was no nearer to gaining his heart.

"How soon, Guy?"

"As soon as I can leave Bertie," he answered, looking anxiously at his watch. "Ah, there is the carriage at last. Good-bye, Celia; take good care of yourself till I come back."

And with a hasty kiss he was gone, and she stood gazing after him till tears of disappointment and jealousy hid him from her sight.

There were times when Celia thought her triumph but a poor one. When the warmth of her love, the caresses and demonstrations of affection dear to her southern nature, checked by her husband's coldness—a coldness of which he himself had grown unconscious—seemed to turn back into her own heart, and burn in a fierce and consuming fire.

And Guy went on his way as fast as steam and horses could carry him, and after a weary interval of suspense reached Jermyn Street.

He met Saunders on the top of the stairs.

"How is he now?"

"Awful bad, sir; raving dreadful. He wont eat——"

Guy did not wait to hear more, but entered the room where Bertie lay.

It was too true. There he was, raving in delirium, muttering names incoherently—Celia's, Kitty's, Guy's—in a confused medley—then starting up in his bed, and shrieking that the house was on fire, that the flames were surrounding him, and imploring help in a tone piteous to hear.

Guy soon left the room; the scene was more than he could bear. He sought

Saunders, and knowing he was an old and trustworthy servant, asked him for some explanation of this terrible state of things.

The man knew little beyond what was apparent, but the real facts were as follows.

For some time past Bertie had taken to drinking deeply; it was his custom to do so when anything had vexed him. Since his acquaintance with Celia his troubles had thickened—her indifference, his heavy debts, and the constant worry of duns had told upon him, and made him hipped and low. "Nothing like brandy for all such complaints," he found; "it set a fellow up, drove dull care to the wall." And so the insidious disease had taken root, and ripened, and brought forth all its bitter fruits, destroying health and fortune and peace of mind.

Bertie's down-hill career had been a rapid one. He had grown madly reckless of his future; in the blindness of his infatuation for Celia, he had never counted the cost of the style in which he was living. He had the best of everything, he knew, but then it was preposterous to suppose that he could do with less. His perfectly appointed three hundred guinea brougham, a masterpiece of

Peters', and that pair of chestnuts—that had been coveted by a royal duke, and were only equalled by the well-known bays owned by his Royal Highness's tailor—these were luxuries that cost money, rather more than he could spare from his thousand a year; but then they were the thing, gave him a tone, and got him talked about.

He knew these actresses well enough—of course he did; nothing went down with them that was not the fashion. Was he to give up all these advantages because he could not quite afford them? Absurd!—not to be thought of; besides, Leoni would set all that right. And Leoni had set it right, so far. He had found the money to meet all this extravagance, with the usual disinterestedness of the Hebrew fraternity; and "kites" had been flown of which the magnitude was appalling, but looking small enough to Bertie at the distant point of view from which he regarded them.

Much of this Guy already knew or suspected; much of it Saunders told him. The man's description of Leoni—"A under-bred looking Moses, sir; all nose and watch-chain"—recalled the day when Guy had met him leaving Bertie's rooms. Bertie was heavily

involved, no doubt, from what Saunders said of stormy interviews between the pigeon and the hawk—of angry remonstrance on one side, and cool, insolent familiarity on the other. Mr. Leoni had grown threatening at times too; this looked as if the game was nearly played out—as if the birds of prey had struck their quarry, and were about to tear it to pieces.

When Saunders left the room, Guy leant back in his chair, and thought over all that he had heard and seen with something very like despair. A strange fatality seemed to attend all his efforts to serve Bertie.

The momentary triumph he had felt when his brother had declared himself completely cured of his hopeless passion for a woman who had deceived and betrayed him, and thankful to be saved by any means from a marriage with her, was destroyed; for it seemed to him that this last state of things was worse than the first. He tried to remind himself that if he had left Bertie to go his own way, and not interposed between him and the woman who had shown him such small mercy, he might by this time have been driven to desperation by the alternate fluctuations of hope and despair. Moreover,

Guy felt that it was unjust to attribute his brother's present state to Celia alone.

This fatal habit of drinking had been begun at Oxford. All that he had seen and heard at the time of the steeple-chase convinced him of that. It was true that during the season in London it had greatly increased. The anxiety, the suspense, the uncertainty, the vague hopes, the wild jealousies that had kept him in a constant fever had driven him to seek oblivion and excitement in all manner of excesses; but Guy had questioned Saunders most closely, and all he gained from the man convinced him that *after* his own marriage Bertie had grown better instead of worse.

In September he had been at Erlesmere, living a more healthy out-of-door life, and returning to his old pleasure in field sports, had shown a decided improvement in appearance and spirits; but on his return to London amongst his former companions, his old haunts, the passion for drink had returned in all its force, and he had spent night after night in gambling and debauchery, lying in a feverish slumber half the day, now in the wildest spirits, now in the deepest depression. How Guy's heart ached

to think of it all! He thought how the tender mother would have suffered could she have seen her bright, dearly loved boy as he had just seen him, could she have heard his frantic ravings and dreadful cries as he had just heard them—and thanked God that she was not alive.

But every pang that would have wrung her heart found an echo in Guy's. All her anxious solicitude, her womanly tenderness for her younger and best loved son, she had left as a sorrowful heritage to her elder. He felt that the burden of them was grievous to bear, but the remembrance that it was still in his power to save Bertie from the anxieties that were pressing so heavily on him roused him from the indulgence of his sorrow.

He wrote a note to a celebrated physician, begging him to come to Jermyn Street that afternoon; then consulting a Post Office Directory, and taking another look at Bertie, who was now asleep, he put on his hat and left the room.

He had not far to go; crossing St. James's Square he walked up King Street, and stopped before a large mansion, over the doorway of which was inscribed St. James's

Chambers. He entered, and addressing an apoplectic-looking hall porter, inquired for Mr. Leoni. The apoplectic porter scanned him for a moment, and then replied—

"First floor, sir; number six."

Guy mounted the stairs, and on reaching the first floor saw a small brass plate under a bell-handle, bearing the superscription, "Mr. Leoni." The door was opened in answer to his summons by an old wizen-faced man, with lank grey hair, a face with a beard of two or three days' growth, small, restless, ferrety eyes, and a sharp red nose, on the tip of which was a pair of silver-mounted spectacles. He wore a seedy suit of black, with a necktie twisted to hide a dirty, much-rumpled shirt—a laudable effort, that was, however, not quite successful. This was Mr. Scrubb, Mr. Isaac Leoni's clerk and familiar. Taking a pen out of his mouth, he asked Guy "who he pleased to want?"

"Is Mr. Leoni at home?"

Mr. Scrubb replied by requesting Guy to walk in. The room they entered was furnished as an office, but contained many things which divested it of its look of business-like propriety. In one corner were

two or three driving whips, and the japanned case of a billiard cue, while in a rack fitted to the wall was an array of hunting caps, riding whips, and walking sticks; lying on a sofa were a bridle and bits; hung about the room were several of Fore's hunting scenes, a water-colour sketch of Blink Bonny, by Herring, and two French prints of ladies on apparently inaccessible mountains, arrayed in elaborate Parisian toilets, which were skilfully disarranged with the object of exhibiting a liberal amount of boots and stockings. Altogether the room had an unmistakeably fast, horsey air, which plainly bespoke the proclivities of the owner.

Guy had taken all this in at a glance, when Mr. Scrubb turned sharply, and asked him what might be his business?

"I wish to see Mr. Leoni."

"Mr. Leoni's rather busy, you know; got a client with him now; wouldn't I do as well?"

"No, my business is of a private nature."

"Oh, ah, yes, of course. Is it money?"

"If you mean, do I want to borrow money—no," replied Guy, in a tone that implied that he wished no more questions asked.

"Oh, very well, sir," said Mr. Scrubb,

eyeing him furtively as he shuffled towards the door, "I'll go and tell Mr. Leoni." Then stopping suddenly, "What name shall I say?"

"Mr. Lawrence."

"Oh, ah, yes. Mr. Lawrence of Erlesmere?" asked Scrubb, quickly.

"Yes."

"I'll go at once, sir."

After a short absence Mr. Scrubb returned, saying that Mr. Leoni would be with Mr. Lawrence directly.

In a few minutes the door was flung open, and Mr. Leoni swaggered in. A coarse, low-bred style of man, looking much the same as when Guy met him at Jermyn Street, but now we was dressed in a short lounging-coat, made of blue serge, and elaborately trimmed with yellow cord.

"How do, shir—how do?" said he. "Sit down, shir—shan't charge anything for that."

And Mr. Leoni having laughed at his small joke, threw himself into an easy-chair.

"I came to see you on a confidential matter," began Guy.

"Yes, shir; all my matters is confidential—point of honour, you know, shir. Oh,

you meansh Scrubb," following Guy's glance. "You needn't mind him: Scrubb's confidential too; forgetsh all he hears directly it's shaid. Eh, Scrubb?"

Guy went to the point at once.

"My brother, Mr. Deverell, has had dealings with you; may I ask what bills of his you hold?"

Mr. Leoni's little eyes sparkled. He knew Guy's resources better than Guy did himself; it was his business to know every rent-roll in England. Bertie Deverell's brother could only be there with one object —to pay Bertie Deverell's debts.

"Well, you know, ash I wash shaying, these little matters are confidential; but it's all in the family, so I don't mind telling you. Scrubb, give me my memorandum-book."

A small brass-locked book was handed to him, and after turning over a few leaves he stopped, and began to scan it.

"Ah, here it is: Bertie Deverell, Esq. Let me see—five and four's nine, and five's fourteen—blesh my heart, how small thinksh amounsh up. Fourteen and sheven's twenty-one, and two's twenty-three—your brother's been very bad, shir, lifts his finger; ah, bad

thing lifting your finger—twenty-three, twenty-eight, thirty-four—dear me, dear me, who'd 'a thought it. Mr. Deverell knowsh how to live, shir; ah, that he doesh, and no mistake—forty-four, fifty-four, eighty-four. He's very hard on me, shir; ain't he, Scrubb? —drives hard bargains—but I like him, Mr. Lawrensh, I like him, and so I puts up with it: eighty-four, ninety-four, a hundred and fourteen. Lor' blesh your soul, shir, he knowsh he can get what he liksh out of me, and that's how it is he's drained me so—a hundred and fourteen, a hundred and thirty-four, a hundred and shixty-four. There. There it is, shir: shixteen thousand four hundred and fifty poundsh, to a shix-pensh."

Guy gave a slight start, and bit his lips with annoyance. Controlling himself, he said calmly,

"You knew my brother's means, no doubt. May I ask how you expected him to pay so large a sum?"

"There, there, shir! there you go, like all the rest of the world, talking as if we're a shet of hard-hearted, blood-sucking harpies, without any conshideration for anybody. Of course, I didn't expect him to pay, shir. I only wanted the interest; pay me off the

prinshipal when he can. I don't care when. I'm in no hurry. When he marrish a gal with money, or shomething or other turnsh up."

Guy stifled the feeling of disgust this speech created.

"You will pardon me, I know you better." He spoke in a quiet, but stern tone. "You allowed my brother to contract these debts because you believed that I should pay them. When you found your victim—stay, no bluster if you please—I say, when you found your victim dangerously ill, and you were in fear of losing all this spoil, you went to him, stricken as he was, almost to death, and tried to bully him into paying—you thought then that he would come to me. You were right: probably he would; as it is, he is unaware that I have come to you. I intend to redeem these bills without consulting him."

The scowl that had settled on Mr. Leoni's face gave way to an obsequious grin.

"Ah, Mr. Lawrensh," he said, in a tone of reproachful remonstrance, "you're too hard on a feller, 'pon my shoul you are. I only went to ask him to let me have a trifle if convenient to him, if quite convenient, mindsh you; and then I found him a leetle

poorly. Now do you think I'd be so unfeeling as to bother a shentleman—such a nishe young shentleman as Mr. Deverell too—when he's poorly, if I'd known it? No, now, 'pon my shoul I wouldn't—I wouldn't, 'pon my honour."

"What did you say the amount is?"

"Shixteen thoushand four hundred and fifty pounds."

Guy put his hand in his pocket and drew forth a cheque-book.

"That represents how much, may I ask, in actual money lent?"

"Nearly all of it; nearly all of it. We must live, you know, and conshider the risk, shir. Suppose anything had happened to him. I should have been a ruined man, shir; clean ruined. I never did it so cheap to anyone before, I take my solemn oath—but then I always liked Mr. Deverell."

While he was speaking Guy had written a cheque, which he tore from his cheque-book.

"You know how much of what you say is true—*I* can guess. Here is a cheque for ten thousand pounds. Allow me to speak, please."

Mr. Leoni threw himself back in his chair

with a contemptuous laugh. Guy continued,

"This, no doubt, is more than my brother ever received from you, with a very liberal interest besides. Give me all the bills you hold of his and I'll hand you this cheque."

"Do you think I'm a baby in swaddling clothes? Watsh yer talking about? Give up six thoushand quid for nothing! What next, I wonder?"

"Do you refuse?"

"Of course I refuse; and if that'sh all you've got to say, shir, I'll wish you good day."

"It's *not* all I've got to say; there's something more."

"Very well, Mr. Lawrensh; only if it's asking me to give up six thoushand pounds or six thoushand pence, it's clean waste of time, that's all."

"We shall see."

Guy looked at him fixedly for a few moments, then in a distinct tone continued—

"Four years ago I was a steward at Northampton races."

Mr. Leoni turned his head quickly, and cast a piercing look at Guy.

"You will recollect the incident I am

going to speak of, for you were there: I saw you in the ring. A certain horse called Fleetwing was first favourite for the cup—I see this interests you—you remember the particulars, no doubt. This horse was looked upon as sure to win, and so it would, but it was pulled on the post and lost by a neck—my memory has not failed me, has it, Mr. Leoni?"

Mr. Leoni had turned a greenish yellow, and he fidgeted uneasily in his chair.

"I shan't want you any more, Scrubb: you can be off."

When that worthy had left the room, Mr. Leoni replied to Guy:

"I think I remember shomething about it," he said, with attempted carelessness—"that sort of thing's so common now-a-daysh—one almost forgetsh. But all the same I can't see what you're driving at."

"You do remember it?"

"Well, I saw the race, but I don't believe the horse was pulled at all, although there was a fuss about it in the papersh."

"Yes there was: the papers stated that the case had been investigated, and Blackett, the jockey, punished—that the *author* of this piece of villany got clear off, for no

threats could wring his name from his accomplice; the owner was above suspicion, and even now would give a thousand pounds to stand face to face with the scoundrel who planned it all. The papers said all this, and plenty more—amongst other things that Leoni, the well known turfite, had won five thousand pounds upon the race. Was this a fact?"

Mr. Leoni was getting more and more ill at ease, and the perspiration was standing in beads on his forehead, as he blurted out—

"I can't see what the deuce it's got to do with you; and listen here, Mr. Lawrensh: you came here on business, and we couldn't come to terms. All right. I can't see what all that's got to do with Fleetwing at Northampton; so if you've nothing else to talk about, we needn't waste no more time."

"I wont detain you much longer, Mr. Leoni, you'll see the application presently. Now for the sequel, which was *not* in the papers. Some time ago, shortly after my return to England, I was sent for to Newmarket. A man was dying, mortally injured by the kick of a horse, and had something important to communicate to me. I hurried down; the poor fellow was a

helper in some training stables. They took me to his bedside, and in the dying man I recognised Blackett, the rider of Fleetwing, at Northampton. You begin to see the application? The poor fellow on his death-bed wrote a confession that he had been bribed to make Fleetwing lose, and that his employer in the transaction was one Leoni, betting-man and money-lender. That confession is now in my pocket."

There was a short pause, during which Mr. Leoni, livid with rage and terror, cast furtive glances at Guy; at last he broke the silence—

"What's the terms?"

"A cheque for ten thousand pounds, and my word of honour not to use this confession so long as you never attempt that sort of game again, in exchange for the bills you hold of Mr. Deverell's."

"And suppose I don't agree?"

"Then I resist your claim at law, for *I* am practically your debtor, and," taking a paper out of his pocket, "I post this interesting document in the rooms at Newmarket."

Leoni saw that he was checkmated.

"Look here now," he said after considering a moment; "sell me that bit o' rag outright; it's no good to you, don't yer know, and I'll give you a monkey for it."

Guy folded up the paper and returned it to his pocket.

"No thank you. I feel rather guilty as it is in compounding such a swindle; the least I owe to society is to look after you for the future."

"You wont do it then?"

"Certainly not."

Mr. Leoni went to an escritoire, and took from it a bundle of papers, then advancing to Guy, "You're smart, Mr. Lawrensh, dev'lish smart, 'pon my shoul you are. I don't want to flatter yer too much, but you've missed yer tip, shir; if you'd been in our profession, you'd have *done*. You've cleaned me out of six thousand quid, and somebody else must suffer for it. *I* can't afford it, and if that ain't fair, I don't know what is. There's Mr. Deverell's stiff, shir, every penn'orth of it."

"And there's the cheque."

Mr. Leoni gave a sort of groan as he cast his eyes upon it.

"Ten thoushand! dear, dear. But I say,

about that other little affair?—honour, you know, Mr. Lawrensh."

"That's a security that you have little faith in, I should think."

"Well, what can I do?" cried Mr. Leoni, in a tone of remonstrance.

"Make a virtue of necessity, and put up with it this time. Good morning."

When Guy returned he found Bertie awake, much refreshed by his sleep, but terribly exhausted by the violent paroxysm that had seized him in his delirium. He smiled feebly, but with a pleased look as Guy approached.

"Ah, Guy, is that you?" he said, as he tried to press his brother's hand. "It's awfully good of you to come. How did you know I was seedy?"

"Some one sent me word," answered Guy, seating himself by the bedside. "But never mind all that: do you feel any better?"

"Yes, much better; my brain doesn't burn so. I shall be all right again in a day or two."

There was a slight pause, then Bertie continued: "I wont attempt to deceive you, Guy; it's drink that has done this. God knows the shame I feel in confessing it

to you, but you've always been such a brick, I can't tell you a lie. What a wretched——"

"Hush, Bertie, don't excite yourself, there's a dear old fellow; that's all past and forgotten. We want to bring you round now. Your head's too low; let me raise it."

And so silencing him with kindly words, Guy rearranged the pillows with the tenderness of a woman.

Late one night, a few days after, as Guy was leaving Bertie's rooms to go to his hotel, a woman, jumping out of a cab, ran up to him.

"Sir, is Mr. Deverell at home?"

"Yes, but he's very ill—confined to his bed."

"Too ill to go out, sir? Oh, Mr. Lawrence, ask him to come. Don't you know me, sir?"

"Who are you?" asked Guy, looking at her in the uncertain light. "I don't remember you."

"I'm Rosie Smithers, sir. You remember father, down at Erlesmere? perhaps you never noticed me, though I've seen you many a time; and father's dying." And she began to cry.

"Dying? My poor girl, is there anything I can do for you?"

"Father sent me for Mr. Bertie—he says he must see him. He's got something on his mind, and he can't rest. I daren't tell you; but, oh, sir, say you'll forgive him, and it was all through me, and he's dying now. Oh, you will forgive him," and sobbing, she caught Guy's hand in hers.

"Forgive him? yes, Rosie, if I've anything to forgive," answered Guy, who thought it very probable divers pheasants and hares might be weighing on Smithers' conscience. "I will come with you, if you like, to see him."

The girl hesitated.

"Sir, I don't know as he wont be angry with me for bringing you. Are you *sure* Mr. Bertie can't come?"

"Quite sure."

"Then will you come—and, oh, Mr. Lawrence, if you would promise not to be angry with him? He's past all punishment now, sir."

"I promise you, Rosie, to forgive him whatever wrong he has done me. Will that do? Come, jump in—where to?"

The girl gave the direction—Chapel Row, St. Giles.

"It's a terrible place, sir," she said, looking at him in a piteous, frightened way; "we've come very low."

"How was it your father left Erlesmere?"

"We've been away ever so long—since—since—oh, sir, I dursn't tell you." And she burst out sobbing again.

"Come, don't cry, Rosie," said Guy, kindly. "We must try and do something for you."

And then he set himself to think what he could do—vexed, as a man always is, to see a woman, and a pretty woman, too, crying.

It *was* a terrible place, this last resort of Bob Smithers, the poacher. Among sickening sights and smells Guy followed Rosie up the dirty street—too narrow for the cab to enter—up the broken, crooked stairs, until she paused before a door.

"You will remember your promise, sir," she said, turning round to him with great, pitiful eyes.

A garret, where the low, sloping rafters met the floor; a heap of rags, and a man stretched upon them, fighting with death; each struggling, gasping breath he drew coming with a rumbling, hollow noise through his emaciated chest. Bare arms, flung down by his side, all muscle and bone

—no flesh; eyes staring from sunken cheeks; livid, foam-flecked mouth—a horrible and ghastly sight.

"Father dear, I've brought Mr. Lawrence. Mr. Deverell is ill, and couldn't come to you," said Rosie, going gently to the dying man's side.

"How are you, my poor fellow?" said Guy, coming forward.

The man stared at him, and then laughed —a horrible laugh, which ended in a choking fit of coughing.

"It ain't no good—yer too late. Have yer brought the peelers with yer? Tell 'em I've cheated 'em—they can't lag me now. Look 'ere." And he held up a skeleton arm—"What have yer come for?"

"Rosie said you wanted to see my brother. I have come in his stead."

"Ah, yes; I'm a bit dazed like. But it weren't you—it was t'other one—the young 'un, as I wanted to see. He knew all about it. Look 'ere—that fine house was yourn, weren't it?"

"What house?"

"The big 'un, up at Erlesmere. Did yer ever find the chap as burnt it down? I daresay you'd a'most killed him if you had?"

"It was an accident," said Guy, thinking he raved.

"Mr. Dev'rell told you that, did he?" raising his head with a terrible effort. "He knew better. It warn't no accident; *I* did it."

"*You?* good God!" cried Guy, shrinking from him, his face suddenly transfigured with horror. "What possible motive——?"

"Ask *him* that. Ask Mr. Dev'rell what motive I had, and p'raps he'll tell you. It ain't no more my fault than his, come to that. If it hadn't bin for him I shouldn't a' done it."

"My brother? What had he done?"

"Done? Ain't it nothing to try and take a man's daughter from him—ain't it——?"

But again the laboured breath failed, and broke into a paroxysm of coughing.

"Father, don't try to talk—don't excite yourself, dear father; let me tell him. Oh, sir, for pity's sake, don't be hard on us!"

"I am utterly bewildered. What does all this mean?"

"It was my fault, sir—all my fault; lay the blame on me. I was nothing but a foolish girl, and Mr. Bertie—he used to meet me, and talk to me, and my head was turned, sir; and I thought it would be a

fine thing to be a lady. And it came to father's ears how I'd been seen with one of the gentlemen, and he was very angry with me, and then I told Mr. Bertie I mustn't see him any more, and——"

"Well?" said Guy, very sternly.

"Oh, Mr. Lawrence, I was only a silly girl. He said I should go with him, and he'd make me a lady, and no one should be cross to me any more. I knew it was wrong, sir; but while he was persuading me, and speaking to me so kind, I didn't feel how wicked it was. But one day it came over me, like, what a bad girl I was, and how all them fine speeches was tempting me to evil. I wanted to get away, sir, for I knew as long as I was there I couldn't help listening to him, and believing him, when he said he loved me, and only meant me well. And then one day, sir, when father had been dreadful angry, and had said he would kill me if he ever found me talking to Mr. Bertie again, and I was all alone, and very miserable, not knowing what to do, there came a letter from my aunt, up in London, saying as she was feeling very lonesome, and would I come and stop a day or two; so I just packed up my things—father was often away for days

and nights together; I couldn't wait to ask his leave, and left the key of the house with a neighbour, but I wouldn't tell her where I was going. I thought as Mr. Bertie would be inquiring, perhaps, and I wanted to do right, sir, and go away from him. I meant to write to father, but when I got to the station it came across me as he might return that night, and wonder where I was; so I went down to Bill Simmons, you know, sir, the farrier, and I asked him to tell father I'd gone to aunt's and he said he would see him that night—they was to meet at the Golden Lion, and he'd be sure and give my message. And he never did, sir."

Rosie burst out crying afresh, but Guy spoke not a word.

"And when I got to aunt's, she said as she'd take me back herself to Erlesmere in a day or two, and there was no call to write. But she put it off, and when we got there, sir, it was too late. Father had heard that Mr. Bertie was away, and he wouldn't believe but what I was with him. He was mad with rage; he wouldn't a' done it else. Oh, sir, indeed he wouldn't; and when at last I found him and told him how it was, he was terribly sorry to think of what he'd

done. He's never been the same since—he hasn't indeed, sir. Oh, for pity's sake forgive him—him and me. It was all my doing."

The girl ceased speaking, and there was a silence, only broken by her sobs and by the sound of the man's heavy breathing.

Guy could not speak. His heart was hot within him at the thought of the wrong which had been done him. He was not a man to bear such an injury tamely. A fierce desire for vengeance seized him.

Vengeance! His eyes fell on the distorted features, the emaciated limbs before him. That was God's, not his.

"Oh, don't be hard on him, sir. Say you'll forgive him, and he'll die easier," sobbed Rosie. "It was all through love of me."

"Don't you go beggin' no favours of him. After all, it warn't me as done it. I was druv to it. I don't want his pardon if he don't like to give it."

Driven to it—yes—and, by whom? Was the man so much to blame? Were not his feelings, his desire for revenge under his fancied wrongs, almost excusable in so rough and untutored a nature?

Struggling with himself, Guy came nearer to him.

"I will try—I do forgive you," he said suddenly. "My poor fellow, you are very bad—after all, it's not *my* pardon that you need."

He felt how near this man was to death—to eternity; and yet he could scarcely bring himself to break through his reserve, and speak to him of religion.

"Oh, I ain't goin' down on my marrer-bones, prayin' and cantin'—what's the good, when I knows if I was to get better I'd be just the same again? I ain't done much 'arm. Some people's born respectable and others isn't—the Almighty wont be as 'ard on us as other folks is—He knows we's druv to things."

Hopeless in such a case as this, Guy stood by the dying man's side, silent.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he said at length. "Have you had a doctor? I will go for one."

"The doctor's been, sir. He says it's no good his coming any more," whispered Rosie.

"I will go for another, at all events. I will come again in the morning."

"It ain't no good, I shall be a dead 'un afore mornin': I thought as I'd be a bit easier if I told one of you. I was sorry-like when I found I'd made a mistake—but I was druv to it, I was," said the man incoherently. "It's a 'ard world. I ain't sorry to go off the 'ooks. If it warn't for the child—little Rosie: there ain't no one as'll see after her. I've always been a rough kind of chap: but I ain't been bad to her."

"I'll see that Rosie is taken care of," said Guy quietly.

"Will yer though—do you mean it?" a sudden light coming into the fading eyes. "And yer wont let t'other one—the young 'un, come nigh her? Do yer mind givin' us your 'and upon it?"

Guy put his hand into the rough skeleton one.

"Good-bye, my poor fellow," he said kindly, and then he paused and hesitated. "One question before I go. You said Mr. Deverell knew of this. Are you sure of that? How and when did he discover—that the fire was no accident?"

"I saw him—same night—and told un," gasped the man—his voice failing him.

Without another word Guy turned and left the room, beckoning Rosie to follow him. "Get him what he needs," he said, putting some money into her hand. "I will go for a doctor, and send a woman to stay the night with you. You will see me to-morrow."

Rosie burst into a torrent of mingled tears and blessings, but Guy broke from her and went down the rickety stairs.

Having performed his promise and procured assistance for Rosie and her father, Guy wended his way back to his hotel.

Far into the night he paced restlessly up and down his room, unable to sleep, distracted by conflicting thoughts. But uppermost of all, was the remembrance of Bertie's deceit.

Bertie had deceived him deliberately; had led him to believe that the fire was the result of an accident, when he had known it to be the offspring of his own folly. Ay—folly was a light word for it, for according to the girl's innocent story, it was not his fault that folly had not turned to crime. Pained, angry, sore at heart, Guy struggled with himself for a long while, feeling how hard it was to forgive the wrong

that had been done him. Visions of the old, beautiful home rose before him, and filled him with regret for all he had lost —and lost through Bertie.

That was the pain of it; wilful and passionate, unscrupulously extravagant he had known Bertie to be, but he had hoped that the anxiety his embarrassments had caused him, and the humiliation and repentance he would probably feel when he found that Guy had rescued him, might have the effect of keeping him within bounds for the future. But now all those hopes were dashed to the ground. Now Guy knew that Bertie had been guilty of far worse things than these, which he had hoped time and experience would cure, and the indignation he felt, in its intensity, well nigh swept away all other feelings.

And then came other thoughts, thoughts of Bertie in his weakness, raving, suffering, stricken almost unto death, thoughts of the time when the bright, handsome boy his mother had loved so well, had been confided to his care—whom he had sworn to protect; and his anger melted, his heart softened, and he resolved to speak no word of all he had learnt until he had schooled himself to do so without anger, until Bertie had so far

recovered as to bear the excitement of such an interview without danger.

About a fortnight later, Guy was at Jermyn Street, seated in an arm-chair by a sofa on which Bertie was lying.

"I think you are all right again now, young one," he said, "you wont want me any longer."

Bertie turned his eyes to Guy with a grateful look.

"Yes, Guy, I've pulled through, thanks to you. And you are going away to-morrow?"

"Yes, I must go to-morrow."

There was a short pause, then Guy broke the silence.

"Bertie, I've something to speak to you about before I go. When you were very ill you were sent for to see Bob Smithers—you remember him?"

An unnecessary question—for Bertie's face gave the answer.

"Smithers! what could he——?"

"He was dying. He wanted to see you. I went in your stead. He had something he wished to say before he died. Can you guess what it was?"

"Guy, listen"—began Bertie, pale and agitated.

"I'd rather not, Bertie. I know all about it, so do you, that's what I can't understand; why you should have deceived me about it."

"It was all a mistake," cried Bertie, starting up. "I knew nothing of the girl, or where she was, at the time of the fire, I give you my word, Guy."

"I know that; yet, considering all you had done to get the girl talked about, it was scarcely wonderful that the father in his passion should believe she was with you."

"It was horribly unfortunate that she should go away at the same time."

"A misfortune caused by you, for you drove her away," answered Guy, speaking shortly, as if the subject was disagreeable to him. "Please don't make excuses, Bertie. I feel too strongly about it. I little thought that I owed the ruin of Erlesmere to you."

It was the only reproach that escaped him, and the moment it had passed his lips he regretted it.

There was silence for a few moments.

"I can't ask you to forgive me," stammered Bertie at last.

"No, Bertie, don't ask me," interrupted Guy, placing one hand on Bertie's shoulder,

"I forgive you without. But I've something else to talk to you about—money."

"Seldom a pleasant theme to those who want it, and that has been my chronic condition since I went 'tick' at the tuck shop when I was a youngster at school," answered Bertie with a forced laugh.

"You've been getting into debt for some time, of course—I know that, Bertie; but I hoped you would have come to me to help you out of your embarrassments; you wouldn't have found me more difficult to deal with than Mr. Leoni. Oh, yes, I know he's the disinterested friend in need. I met him leaving your room one day—terrible scoundrel that Mr. Leoni: don't have anything to do with him, young one."

Bertie looked very crestfallen.

"Well, Guy, I confess I have had dealings with him, and—and large dealings too; I lost hatsful of tin on the turf, one way or another. I didn't like to ask you, you know, and what the deuce was I to do?"

"Didn't like to ask me? I suppose it would come to that in the end. Don't bet on horse-racing, Bertie—no gentleman can hold his own with the black-legs who infest a betting-ring. I suppose your allowance

is not enough for you; we must talk that over another time, but here is something to relieve you for the present," and Guy handed him a small packet of papers. Bertie took it and opened it. It contained his bills for over sixteen thousand pounds, the money he owed to Leoni.

"Oh, Guy——"

"There, never mind that, Bertie; we've no time to waste in thanks. Say good-bye instead, for I must go."

Bertie seized his hand, and a big lump rose in his throat, but with a struggle he mastered it, and gulped out "good-bye."

"Take care of yourself, Bertie; don't get into a fix again if you can help it, but if you do, come to me, and see if I can't pull you through it."

And taking up his hat Guy hurried away, eager to escape from his brother's gratitude, and in mortal terror of anything approaching a scene.

CHAPTER IX.

IN a small salon—all glitter and gilt, mirrors and ruby velvet—in one of the most fashionable hotels in Paris, three women were together. A year and a-half does not make much perceptible difference in the appearance of young people, yet it had changed two of the three then present from girls into women, and in the third—Mrs. Hoare, the wife of the banker, whose riches had so greatly increased that they had become a thing to marvel at, a subject of speculation and curiosity—it had made a change that was not an improvement.

She had somehow lost her individuality, she had become an automatic mirror of fashion; a walking advertisement of the latest modes. Women studied the folds and trimmings of her dress, the shape of her chignon, the size of her bonnet, as they studied their Bibles—rather more, perhaps, some of them. So perfect was she in every

grotesque device, every newest whim of that most ravenous goddess, Fashion, who swallows up beauty and youth, freshness and purity, all in her fell clutches—that to follow her at the humblest distance, to imitate her however faintly, was to attain to the height of their glorious ambition, was to reach that blessed ultimatum of feminine hopes, and be "in the fashion." What time, what labour, what health and strength and money were wasted to make this one woman perfect, according to the laws of fashion in the nineteenth century—*a chef-d'œuvre* of art, with all natural perfections hidden or obliterated!

Dress had always been a mania with Mrs. Hoare; it had been growing upon her, and with the increase of wealth, when no bounds were set to her extravagant expenditure, it had become so great that, little by little, it was swallowing up all the loveable qualities natural to her. No woman can dress perfectly (according to fashionable ideas of perfection), even with the help of milliners and maids, without bestowing much time and thought on the subject; and a woman who becomes an abject votary of fashion, a woman who, like Mrs. Hoare, tries to out-

Paris Paris, must necessarily divide her time into two portions—one to the attainment of perfection, the other to the exhibition of it. For where is the good of being perfectly dressed, if there is no one to see it? So, between fashion and society, Mrs. Hoare came to have less and less time to devote to pleasing others—making them happy, and fondling her children as she used to do; and though she could never be anything but good-natured and pleasing, yet she was a trifle less charming and loveable than she had been; and it seemed as if gradually, almost imperceptibly, the fine lady part of her threatened to predominate over the homely and womanly. It seemed as if art was doing its best to swallow up the beauty of mind and heart, as well as of face and figure.

See her as she lies back in her gilded chair and gazes wearily at the florid decorations of this Parisian hotel! The stiff and voluminous folds of the most intensely Parisian of dresses deprive her attitude of all ease and grace; the huge bows and buckles and stilted heels of her shoes disguise her small feet; the long, massive, yellow chignon disfigures her pretty head; and on her face is a weary,

slightly dissatisfied look, that shows increase of wealth has not brought increase of happiness.

One of the other women in the room formed a most striking contrast to this pretty Dresden china shepherdess. She wore a grey dress made of some soft, clinging material that fitted tightly to her well-moulded figure, and swept on to the ground, and lay there in a mass of shadowy artistic folds. Bands of black velvet at her neck and wrists and waist showed the fairness of her skin, and the delicate rounded proportions of her slight figure. Her hair, which was simply bound round her head, came low on her forehead, and the face bent over her work was a very striking one.

And yet it was a face which no one would think of calling pretty. It had lost the bloom and roundness of extreme youth; it had lost freshness, though it had gained that which is a compensation for all the charms of youthful "prettiness." Artists and physiognomists—acute observers—might have called it beautiful, but not pretty; it never could be pretty any more, and, to ordinary eyes it was only very sweet, and very, very placid.

It was the face of a woman who had

suffered. It had a repose about it, a settled calm, like one of those ideal pictures of a *sœur de charité*, of a young woman who has set herself apart from the world, and has done with the life she has scarcely begun —has done with all the hopes and fears, the joys and sorrows, and in resignation has gained peace and rest.

This was the peculiarity of her appearance, that though she was evidently very young, she had a look of being prematurely aged—of having, through some illness or suffering, come to look much older than she was. "Sadly changed," as Mrs. Hoare would say when people remarked the little governess. "She used to be quite nice-looking—such a pretty colour—and now she always looks so pale and worn."

But no one knew any cause for the change, or attached any little romantic history to the alteration in Kitty Lorton. About a year and a half ago she had not been well —never very seriously ill, only rather ill, and visibly drooping; but she had kept up and lived her life much as usual, and the illness had been quietly got over and forgotten. But somehow, very gradually and unconsciously, people began to treat her and look upon her differently.

When she first came to Mrs. Hoare she was regarded more as a companion and playfellow of the children; now she was trusted with the charge of them, and considered quite old enough, and competent to be their governess. True, they had masters and mistresses for every possible or impossible accomplishment under the sun, and she had little to do with their instruction, but, with the care of them, everything. The little pale, quiet governess sometimes smiled sadly to herself, to think how people seemed to treat her as if she had suddenly grown so much older; but she never wondered, for she felt the difference in herself.

In those few years that had elapsed since the summer of Lady Caroline's death, she felt as if she had almost lost her identity; that the Kitty Lorton of those days, could not be the Kitty Lorton of these. She looked back on the bright, happy girl, who used to be so gay and coquettish and thoughtless, with a sort of incredulity as if it could not have been herself. She felt as if it were so much more natural that she should be as she was now, grave and quiet and saddened—a woman who, before she had reached three-and-twenty, had lost all

trace of girlishness. From that summer, three and a-half years ago, she dated everything; for since then she had lived her life and done with it—done with the hopes of girlhood, and settled down with resignation and peacefulness at three-and-twenty to the certainty of the fate she had so much dreaded then. People would have laughed at her if she had told them all she thought and felt, but she knew her own heart, knew that it was no mere girlish disappointment that made her feel so far apart from the hopes and anticipations that brighten women's lives—knew that she had no desire now, no hope, except that nothing might happen to destroy the calm which had come to her through much suffering.

She tried very hard, too, not to let the great sorrow of her own life sour her, and make her envious of the happiness of others. Every now and then she looked up from the elaborate lace-work which she was trying to extricate from the tangle into which it had grown beneath Mrs. Hoare's careless fingers, with great interest at Lily Ransford, who was standing in the window, gazing more from idleness than curiosity up and down the gay street.

She was changed too, since the day when she had declaimed against her sister's indiscriminate abuse of actresses. She had developed into a woman, a very pretty woman—and though she retained much of her old mocking, careless manner, there was a shadow of newly gained seriousness on her fair face that was infinitely becoming to it. She was dressed fashionably, though she seemed somehow to have adopted the picturesqueness without the absurdity of her sister's dress, and she incessantly twirled a massive diamond ring, that shone conspicuously on the third finger of her left hand.

"Like the red star on the pictures at the Royal Academy, to show that I am disposed of," she used to say, laughingly.

And Kitty used to look at her wonderingly and lovingly, and think that it was her coming marriage that had made her just a little graver than usual—think how glad she was that no disappointment was likely to come near her and change her merry, sunshiny nature—no cankerous worm to eat away the rose-leaves scattered in the pathway of her life.

"Who do you think is here, Clara?" asked Lily, suddenly.

"It would be easier to tell you who is not. All the world and his wife."

"All the world, but not his wife; a wise man leaves her behind when he comes to Paris. I wonder why Charlie was so deluded as to bring us here."

"I am happy to say Charlie knows his duty to his wife better than you can teach him, Lily. He would bring the children—that was not my doing."

"No; they would have been happier and better running about in the country, poor mites, than learning prematurely the follies and absurdities of Parisian life," said Lily, seriously. "But to return to our mutton. Can you guess who I met on the stairs to-day?"

"Why do you trouble me to guess? Who was it?"

"Bertie Deverell; but so changed, so terribly changed, that I almost passed him before I knew him. He looks so worn and haggard; so old, comparatively speaking, as if he had been very, very ill. I was so sorry for him—but he was with a number of other fellows; I could only just speak to him."

"Dear, dear! what can be the matter with him? I'm rather sorry that he's here,

though. I heard Charlie say that he was in a very fast set, and it was just as well not to know too much of him."

"Clara! poor Bertie, our cousin!"

"Who was with him? Did you know any of the other men?"

"No one, except that little weak-eyed Lord Leath, who used to be at some of your parties. I always hated that little fellow—looks as if he had been fed on milk-and-water all his life; but poor Bertie was quite different: he used to be such a good-natured, bright boy; he can't be much more than a boy now—about three-and-twenty, I suppose.

"Oh, more than that, surely," said Mrs. Hoare, with a yawn. "When *is* Charlie coming back?"

"He is not quite three-and-twenty," said a quiet little voice from the corner. "He is a little younger than I am."

Mrs. Hoare started in astonishment.

"You, Miss Lorton? Oh, I forgot; you knew him in Aunt Caroline's lifetime."

Kitty smiled to herself to think how well she had known him, but she said nothing—only regretted that she had spoken at all.

"You don't seem to take much interest in poor Bertie, Clara," said Lily, reproach-

fully; "you never cared a rap for him, poor boy—only for Guy; but I always had the bad taste to like Bertie best—he's more my style; just a little *méchant*. But Guy—well, I never could help thinking him a wee bit priggish—perhaps because you always set him up for such a hero. Poor Guy! I wonder what's become of him."

That this subject had more interest for Mrs. Hoare was evident in the renewed animation of her listless face; and it was pitiful to see the sudden breaking up of the calm, the mute, eager questioning, in the sweet, pale face of the governess.

"Guy is at Naples," responded Mrs. Hoare, curtly. "That you couldn't appreciate him only shows that he wasn't quite fast enough to reach the high standard you set up as your style."

"Don't be so savage, Clara. I'm quite willing to confess that it's a sort of natural dislike to own other people's superiority that prevents me from caring very much for those goody sort of people. And why do you always speak of him in the past tense as if he were dead?"

"He is dead to us. We can't associate with that woman, so we're not likely to see

him any more; he knows it, and that's why he has hidden himself abroad since his marriage. But I think he'd be rather surprised to hear himself called 'goody;' I thought that was the cant term of you fast young ladies for anyone demonstratively religious —always preaching and distributing tracts, and that sort of thing."

"Well, it was your fault for always setting him up as a model. I don't suppose he himself had any idea of going in for being a hero of the 'goody' type—poor Guy!"

"If it's setting him up for a model to say that he was more gentlemanly, courteous, and honourable than most of the men of the present day, then I do set him up as a model; but it's simply absurd to call him 'goody.' I never heard him speak of religion or make the smallest pretence to it in my life, though I have heard Aunt Caroline say he *was* religious in a quiet sort of way."

"If he *is* so gentlemanly — so very honourable—then the world maligns him cruelly," said Lily, gravely.

"Lily? what do you mean? Is it possible you can repeat those infamous slanders?"

"I hope they are slanders—I believe they are, for I cannot think so badly of Guy as to think them true. But it's a pity, a very great pity, that he should have put himself in such a position, that people can even say such things of him. Why, even Teddy believes them, and says it is a well-known fact that Bertie was in love with Guy's wife, and that Guy first of all did all he knew to set his brother against her, and then married her himself. He says that there are several fellows in that set—Bertie's set—who knew all about it at the time who wouldn't speak to Guy if they met him, and that it is probably because he dreads meeting people, knowing what they must think of him, that he remained abroad."

"Hush, Lily: I won't hear another word! If Colonel Temple has the bad taste to entertain his future wife with slanderous reports of her cousin, you at least should know better than to repeat them."

"You are so impatient, Clara. Didn't I tell you I didn't believe all this about Guy? I only think it's a pity he should have given an appearance of truth to these slanders, by remaining abroad—by being married so secretly, and by giving up all correspondence or intercourse with us or

any of his former friends—only that makes me fear that there must be some small foundation of truth to all this falsehood, that he may have done something he has repented of, and is ashamed of."

"He may be ashamed of his wife, but he's not the man to do a thing he'd be ashamed to own. He'd be much more likely to have sacrificed himself to some foolish Quixotic notion of generosity—because this horrible woman threw herself on his pity, or something. Whatever motive he may have had for marrying her you may be sure it was not a selfish one. If the truth ever comes out—I don't suppose it ever will—you'll find I'm right. Now pray don't talk any more about it—I hate discussing these sort of things."

And with an air of intense fatigue Mrs. Hoare relapsed into her former state of languid repose, smoothed her ruffled feathers, half-closed her eyes, and resumed her inspection of the opposite wall.

"I didn't know you had so much energy left," said Lily, with a light laugh. "I haven't seen you show so much about anything, except the Paris fashions, for the last six months. I've no doubt the unwonted

exertion will do you good, and I'm quite willing to confess you may be in the right, and I in the wrong—though remember, I haven't said anything about Guy, except that appearances were against him—yet it is better to be on the safe side, and 'think no evil.'"

Lily made a pirouette round the room as if to shake off her unwonted gravity, and alighting by Kitty Lorton's side, laid her hand caressingly on her shoulder:

"Busy, as usual, little mouse?" she said gently. "You are a continual reproach to my idleness. I feel like the butterfly who tried to beguile the industrious bee into playing with her—*do* come and talk to me and amuse me."

But Kitty shook off the hand that would have caressed her, and rose abruptly.

"I am busy," she said, coldly, and crossed over to Mrs. Hoare's side.

"Will this do?" she asked gently, holding out the lace for inspection; "it seems all right now."

"Oh yes, very nice, very nice indeed—so good of you, Miss Lorton," said Mrs. Hoare, scarcely looking at it.

"Perhaps you would like me to finish this piece?"

"If you would—but wont it be a great trouble to you?"

"I shall like to do it for you," said Kitty, quietly, and she turned and went out of the room, feeling, for the first time in her life, as if she almost loved Mrs. Hoare—as if it was a pleasure even to do that wearisome lace-work for her. Had she not made herself Guy's champion, and defended him against those cruel slanders, while Lily had made herself their mouth-piece? Kitty felt half ashamed of herself for feeling so angry with Lily.

What right had she to be angry—she who had once, long ago, done Guy Lawrence such injustice? She was ashamed of her own impatience, too; she, who thought she was learning to be patient and long-suffering, had broken down at the first trial. But it was hard to have to sit still and hear Guy Lawrence maligned, and not be able to say a word in his defence. Only because she had once loved him, only because she respected him so, and knew him to be so worthy of respect——surely, surely not because she was so foolish and so wicked as to love him still?

"What made Kitty so cross, I wonder?"

said Lily Ransford, with a look of amazement on her fair face, as the door closed. "I must have done something to offend her."

"You spoil her; governesses and servants always turn out badly when they are made too much of."

CHAPTER X.

LILY RANSFORD'S description of Bertie Deverell's appearance was not an exaggerated one. The six months that had elapsed since Guy had visited him in his illness, had not obliterated the traces of that illness.

See him now, as he stands talking to Bentham in the enclosure of the stand at Porchefontaine. Worn and haggard, he looks truly far older than his years; there is a defiant recklessness in the blue eyes that were once so bright and honest, and a certain daredevilry about him that is a painful exaggeration of his old *débonnair* manner.

"Not plunging, eh, Bertie?" said Bentham, who had only just joined him. "I thought you had cut this sort of thing."

"So I have, nearly," answered Bertie, with a careless laugh, knocking the ash off his cigar; "but I've returned to my early love to-day, because she promises to be kind to me."

"Don't trust her then; one's loves always do beckon a fellow in that sort of fashion, to humbug him when he's fool enough to respond."

"A highly philosophical growl; but this is really a good thing, I know."

"What is it?"

"Pelleas for the Prix de Haras; belongs to Alverstoke; won at Croydon last year, and ran a good second to Clincher in the Grand National. Bede's to ride, too—best gentleman jock in the world."

"Fleurette seems to be fancied by the French stable, and they are getting awfully knowing now; they say, too, that the Count has backed her heavily."

"Oh, yes; that goes for nothing. Fleurette belongs really to a 'certain high personage,' as the papers say, and he has had the 'pot put on' to make the French mare and *le sport* generally popular in France. Part of his policy, you know, keeps them out of mischief. Pelleas can give this Fleurette pounds."

"Think so? Well, we shall see; haven't backed him for much; have you?"

"Nothing very enormous. Couldn't have got on at all, hardly, at a little affair like this, but De Longueville, and two or three other

fellows from the Jockey Club, are here. I shall win a good stake, though. The fact is, you know, in spite of all my strict economy, and that sort of thing, I've got deucedly hard up. Don't know how it is—believe if I were dropped in the middle of a desert, where I couldn't spend a penny, I should get hard up. Well, I don't want to draw upon Guy again, he behaved so awfully well last time; so, hearing this 'tip,' I thought I would drive out, and win enough to set me up again—*voilà tout*, as they say here. But we shall miss the start; let's go on the stand."

Porchefontaine, the earliest racing fixture of the year in France, is a small third-rate meeting, which serves, however, to attract most of the sporting Englishmen that are in Paris for the season; indeed, the shouts of "Three to one—bar one," completely drown the excited cries of "*Combien contre Fleurette?*" from the Gallic "fancy."

Now they are off! Pelleas shaking himself free of his horses in the first few strides, his fine sweeping action keeping him clear without any apparent effort. In this order he and Fleurette run, clearing all obstacles without a mistake, until they are five hundred yards from the winning post.

And now the mare seems to draw upon the English crack, slowly but surely Pelleas' rider sees the danger, and does all that cool judgment and skilful riding can do to keep his lead, the gallant brute responding to his call by struggling gamely to shake off his rival. But it is all useless, the mare reaches his girths, now takes the last fence neck-and-neck with him, and now gallops in a winner by a length, amidst the waving of handkerchiefs by the elaborately toiletted occupants of the stand, and frantic gesticulations of delight from their *chèrs amis*.

Bertie closed his glass with an exclamation of annoyance.

"So much for your 'good thing,' Bertie," said Bentham, as Fleurette's number was hoisted.

"It *is* a sell. I was told Pelleas was a 'moral.'"

"Pshaw! I don't believe in 'morals.'"

"That's because you haven't any."

"Quite true, I'm happy to say; especially as you have proved that they are not such 'good things' after all." Then, as Leath sauntered up, "Let in the hole, eh?"

"Yes, by Jove! ah, Bentham, you here? How long have you been in Paris?"

"Came over yesterday. Saw that cad Pearce; he told me you and Bertie were at the Grand, so I put up there. Last night at the table d'hôte—you fellows didn't show, by-the-bye—a man told me of these races, so as I knew that anything in the way of pigskin or petticoats is a sure draw for Master Bertie, I thought I'd come and look for you."

"Going to stop long?"

"Only a fortnight or so, for change of air."

"Deuced little air you'll get except night air, if you have much to do with Bertie. What are you going to do to-night?"

"Dine," answered Bentham.

"*Après?*"

"My dear fellow, dinner in Paris always employs me till bed-time. I never hurry it—destroys the enjoyment, and ruins one's digestion. The only *après*, for me will be a small cup of café noir, a cigar, and then to perch."

"Bentham goes in for beauty sleep; we don't require that sort of thing, eh, Bertie? But look here, there's a bal d'opéra at the Gymnase to-night, it's always good fun—let's go."

"Not I, thank you," answered Bentham.

"You'll come, Bertie?"

"Oh, yes, one must do something. May as well go there as anywhere. Going to bet a five-franc piece on this race? They'll think you a reckless gambler if you invest more."

That evening Bertie and Leath went to the Gymnase.

The bal d'opéra was nearly over. It was like all other masked balls in Paris, and unlike any of the miserable, spiritless imitations that are attempted in London. The decorations, the brilliant glare of gas-lamps, the well-trained orchestra, and all the minor accessories were the same; but here in Paris the superb costumes showed a taste for artistic blending of colour and picturesque effect which was as strong a contrast to the tawdry, ill-fitting, awkward imitations that are seen at an English bal masqué, as the untranslatable Parisian *élan* and *chic* are to the senseless, meaningless wit which in England displays itself only in squirting scent into the eyes of unsuspecting passers-by, or by offering unprovoked insult for the sole object of raising that most cherished of all institutions to the youth of England—a "row."

The orchestra was playing the last dance; the soft strains of Gungl's Krolsbalklange Valse rose above the merry laughter and the gay prattle of the crowds of dominoes, *débardeurs, coryphées, princes au théâtre,* and the thousand and one other characters that made up the crowd.

It was a brilliant picture, this phantasmagoria of bright-coloured, moving forms. Yes, reader, truly an assemblage of immorality and vice in almost all its phases—no doubt of that; but still a sight to be looked upon just once in a lifetime, to leave no taint of its iniquity, but only a dreamy remembrance in after years as of a scene from some enchantment story in the Arabian Nights.

Bertie was leaning against a statue, looking on with a careless, slightly *ennuyé,* air, paying little heed to what was going on around him.

"Eh donc!" said a voice by his side. "How sad you are. Look at this rose—it is beautiful—it is the emblem of love. Will you not buy it?"

Bertie turned his head to the speaker. She was a bright-faced brunette, *aux yeux noirs,* dressed as a flower girl. As she spoke

she took a rose from her basket and held it up to him with a coquettish smile.

"Love that is bought is always worthless," answered Bertie, in tolerably fair French. "Have you none to give away, mam'selle?"

"You would not value it the more—men never do. They gather the rose and revel in its fragrance, and when they tire of its sweetness they cast it away as a worthless weed."

"You can have had no such bitter experience."

"Quell' innocence," answered the girl, with a careless laugh. "No experience? Plenty of it; but I'm a hardy plant, and when I'm cast aside I always manage to take root again."

"It would be a ruthless hand that could harm so fair a flower as you, ma belle."

"Yes, and a bold one too, for it would feel my thorns. Ah! here comes Jules. Comment s'va, mon cher?"

The individual addressed was a big, broad-shouldered, beetle-browed, olive-complexioned man, dressed in a very elaborate evening dress. He approached with a scowl, and after bestowing an insolent look on Bertie turned to the girl.

"You seem determined to avoid me," he growled.

"Pardieu! yes; one finds pleasanter companions elsewhere."

"Is this one of them?" sneered the Frenchman, with a toss of his head towards Bertie; then turning to him he added, contemptuously, "M'sieu looks as if his head was empty of brains. N'importe, so long as his pockets are full of money. Nothing speaks so eloquently to mam'selle here as the chink of gold."

"Brutes are taught to comprehend the eloquence of a horsewhip—*you* would understand me in a single lesson."

"You! mon Dieu!" cried the fellow, dancing about in an excited way, "you horsewhip me—ouf!"

And with an insulting gesture he snapped his fingers in Bertie's face. The next moment he was sprawling on the floor, from a well-directed blow between the eyes.

By this time a considerable crowd had assembled—the Frenchman picked himself up and was preparing to attack Bertie.

"Are you going to thrash him, old fellow?" asked Leath, who at that moment joined him.

"Most certainly."

They were about to engage when a man, stepping from the crowd, placed his hand before Bertie.

"Pardon me," he said, in English, "this must not go on."

Bertie turned to the speaker. He was a tall, strikingly handsome, aristocratic-looking man, with dark piercing eyes, short black hair streaked with grey, a heavy pointed moustache and imperial. He was dressed in admirably fitting evening dress, spoke with scarcely any foreign accent, and altogether his appearance and calm impassive manner stamped him with an unmistakeable air of breeding. But with all this there was an indescribable something in his glance that would have made a keen observer distrustful of him.

"Why do you interfere?" asked Bertie coldly, turning to him impatiently, while the crowd loudly expressed their disapproval of the stranger's pacific intentions. "You could not have seen what passed."

"I saw it all, but a gentleman does not fight with such a fellow as this, it would do him too much honour."

"This man is a stranger to me."

"Exactly, monsieur;" then he added in French, looking at the man, "but he is not so to me. He was once the marker of a billiard room, in the Rue Chaussée—he is now a well known bully."

The crestfallen object of his remarks, after scowling malignantly at his denouncer, and muttering an oath or two through his moustache, sneaked away, the crowd dispersed, and the stranger was left with Bertie and Leath.

"Thank you for showing up that fellow," said Bertie as they all turned towards the door. "I really mistook him for a gentleman."

"Did you?" answered the stranger with a slight laugh. "I don't think I should. I've unfailing instinct in that respect. As for that blackguard who insulted you, he is notorious. He would never attempt it with anyone but a foreigner. You do not live in Paris, of course?"

"No, I came over a fortnight ago."

"Only a fortnight ago; then a month of your existence has been lost. I marvel that any man can live in your winter fogs, with Paris at the height of its season within a few hours' journey. Where are you staying?"

"At the Grand."

"You go in my direction then. Will you try one of these cigars? I get them through the embassy from Havana. What did you think of the ball?"

"One of the best I have ever seen."

"Yes, it was a very good one. I've seen bals d'opéra at almost every capital in Europe, I believe; but they were very tame, almost solemn at some places—everywhere but in Paris."

"It's nearly a year since I went to a bal masqué," chimed in Leath; "at Covent Garden, you know—wasn't half bad, I assure you."

"You English don't understand that kind of thing. To me there is something ludicrous in the way you all walk about, and stare at one another. You know nothing of the art of creating pleasure, you know little of how to enjoy it. Not that it matters much: London is the mint where money is made; Paris is the mart where pleasure is bought; it is simply a matter of supply and demand, and so long as the city of cities stands, she will not want for customers. These are my rooms. Will you come in? I can offer you some very good curaçoa."

Bertie and Leath accepted the stranger's invitation, and followed him into his rooms, a superbly furnished flat "au troisième" in the Rue ——.

A most amusing host they found him, as they sat smoking and listening to his anecdotes. There seemed to be scarcely a habitable place he had not visited, or a person of note in any of them of whom he had not some piquant story to tell. The mysteries of racing stables, choice *esclandres* of half the beauties in Paris or London, intrigues of the stage, and *historiettes* of its brightest stars, all were touched upon, and it was not till past six o'clock that Bertie and Leath took their leave, after having made an appointment to dine at Meurice's with their new acquaintance on the following evening.

"You will call here for me?"

"Yes," answered Bertie; "but who shall I inquire for?"

"The Count Rosetti."

"*Au revoir!* then, Count, till seven o'clock to-morrow."

The following, or rather the same, morning, about twelve o'clock, Rosetti, attired in an embroidered dressing-gown and elabo-

rately-worked Turkish slippers was seated at his breakfast-table, indulging in a repast of kidneys and claret, and reading the newspaper. When he had finished he lighted a cigarette, and then, opening the drawer of a small cabinet, took from it a pack of cards. Seating himself at the table, he proceeded to cut them, then having cut them, went through the act of turning up, each time producing a king. When he had gone through this performance a few times, he practised other tricks, until he seemed quite satisfied with the result of his experiments.

Presently the door opened, and a man entered.

"Ah, Pearce," said Rosetti, with a wave of his hand, "you want to know whether I have marked the quarry?"

"Not exactly," answered Harvey Pearce, for it was he. "I know that already; I saw you leave the theatre together, and——"

"And when the game is once in my grip, I don't often let it slip through my fingers. That's what you would say, is it not, mon cher? But tell me about these friends of yours—they are rich?"

"No—haven't a franc between them, except what they raise from the Jews."

"Why, I thought you said——"

"That Deverell was a pigeon worth plucking. Yes, so he is—thanks to his brother, who's got plenty of money and will part with it freely to keep his brother out of trouble."

"Ah, that's better still. It's astonishing how liberal people are with what is not their own. This Deverell and his friend are going to dine with me to-night."

"Will you want me?"

"No, not the first night; it doesn't do to flush the covey until you're sure it's within easy range. Never attempt to land your fish until its properly played. By the bye, I've just had a cheque for two hundred odd from young Crichton, to redeem his I.O.U."

"No more to be done in that quarter: he's clean gone—had to fly no end of stiff to raise this money."

"How do you know this?"

"From Mo Davis, who is now in Paris. Asked me if I thought him good for three hundred and fifty pounds. Mo and I are old friends—put many a good thing in each other's way. He tells me that our friend Bertie Deverell, too, has been raising the wind—borrowed a monkey only yesterday."

"Dame! that looks as if he's pressed for money."

"Yes."

"And he may become cautious?"

"Oh, no; Bertie Deverell cautious! It isn't in him. He has lost this money at Porchefontaine, and at the first chance he'll take a blind plunge to recoup himself."

"Eh bien! We'll give him one. Have some curaçoa, mon ami, or a brandy-and-seltzer. What a wasted man you are, Pearce!"

"Think so? Well, I suppose I have missed my tip somehow at some time."

"Pardieu! yes. If your merits had been recognised you'd have been a Chancellor of the Exchequer. I never knew such talent for financiering and diplomacy combined. You are just the man for the post—not overburdened with conscientious scruples."

Harvey Pearce's reappearance on the scene in connexion with the Count Rosetti is easily explained.

At the time of the Aylesbury Steeplechase he was living entirely on the doubtful profits that accrued from betting. Having a rather extensive acquaintance amongst the men of his old university, for some time he

made a very fair living by this means. His modus operandi was extremely simple. Looked upon as a good judge in racing matters, as he always was by the "horsey" set at Oxford, his "tips" were eagerly sought, and unhesitatingly acted upon. But he always supplemented his advice by suggesting a certain book-maker as a "safe man" to make their outlays with. The collusion was never suspected; the lion and the jackal shared the profits, laughing in their sleeves the while at the gullibility of their prey. But supplies from these sources, though abundant enough at first, soon began to fail. It is true that occasionally one of the "good things" advised by Pearce came off—in which case he had generally intended such should be the result, and took care to assure the confederacy against loss, but the greatest certainties, on which the largest "pots" had been put, were so often upset through some "unaccountable mystery," some most extraordinary mistake, that Pearce's disciples began to lose faith in their prophet, and forbore to follow up the bad luck that had attended his selections.

From the turf, Pearce turned his talents

to account at the gaming-table. One great advantage was on his side—he was not hampered by any conscientious scruples. His only consideration was to avoid detection. He saw that with the aid of an accomplice large sums might be won by cards at the clubs of which he was a member, for his character was as yet unsuspected. Accident soon gave him the opportunity he was seeking.

One night he was present at a supper-party given by a certain Captain Legge, who called himself a gentleman jockey, but whose sole income was derived from the fees he received *sub rosa* for his mounts, and the rather considerable sums that were to be made in other ways in connexion with his "sport." Amongst the guests was Count Rosetti, who after supper commenced playing écarté with the Earl of Tottenham —a fair-haired, soft looking youth of two-and-twenty.

The others, with the exception of Pearce, played at loo; but he, yielding to an unaccountable inclination, sat by the écarté table, and without appearing to bestow more than ordinary interest on the game, narrowly watched the Count. He was soon convinced of what he had instinctively sus-

pected. The Count in dealing turned a king: it was adroitly done, but not with sufficient neatness to prevent Pearce seeing that it was drawn from the bottom of the pack, where it had, of course, been placed by some clever legerdemain on the part of the dealer. Pearce said nothing, but waited till the Count was going, and took his leave at the same time. The Count's rooms were in Pall Mall—Pearce's in Sackville Street; and so they walked together.

"That little muff, Tottenham, is going the pace, I expect," said Pearce, when they had gone some distance. "He'll be dipping his ancestral acres in mortgages before he's much older, I'll bet."

"Do you think so?" answered the Count, throwing away the end of his cigarette. "He's immensely rich—so rich that I should say he finds it difficult to spend his income."

"Without assistance, perhaps." Then, after a short pause, "You must have been a large winner to-night? What a heap of money might be won from him!"

"Possibly; but one cannot control one's luck."

"But one might be independent of it."

"What do you mean?" asked the Count, casting a sidelong glance at Pearce.

"Suppose one could see his cards, for instance; or, what is the same thing, knew what he held through a confederate?"

The Count stopped short, and turned to Pearce with an indignant air.

"Sir, that would be cheating."

"Of course. What then?"

"That it is as difficult to comprehend such a suggestion coming from a gentleman as it is impossible to suppose that one could be guilty of it."

Pearce turned his head, and looked quietly at the Count.

"Do you think it more impossible in a gentleman than the stale old trick called 'couper le roi?'"

The Count started, but was too old a hand to betray himself.

"I really don't understand you, sir," he said, in a frigid tone. "I presume you don't dare——"

"Ah, don't excite yourself, Count; I'm not the man to spoil sport. I saw you turn the king to-night in a way that some opponents might object to. It was cleverly done, but it seemed to me that after all it's a

clumsy trick, and might lead to an awkward scene. But with an obliging friend behind your opponent's chair, by George, you could skin the lamb as safely and easily as possible."

The Count listened to all he said. At first he thought of resenting the charge, for he knew that it could not be proved; but then he remembered that the stigma of the accusation alone would be sufficient to ruin his chances of future success, and that, after all, there was much good sense in Pearce's suggestion. So he dropped his tone of indignation, and they then and there formed an offensive alliance, which worked so well both in London and Paris, that it had continued and flourished ever since.

Pearce had seen Bertie Deverell's name amongst the arrivals, and it occurred to him that he might be a pigeon worth their plucking. He knew Bertie's passion for gambling, and he had a shrewd idea that, however large the sums that might be lost by Bertie, they would be paid by Guy Lawrence, rather than his brother's name should suffer. Pearce and the Count never appeared together as friends; it might have led to awkward suspicions. It was planned, there-

fore, that the Count, to whom Bertie had been pointed out by Pearce, should go to the bal d'opéra on the chance of meeting his intended victim, and seize any opportunity that chance might present to make his acquaintance. How he succeeded is already known.

The dinner at Meurice's—a recherché little affair, owing as much to the Count's judgment in the choice of the *ménu* as to the skill of the *chef*—was a great success.

The host was very brilliant—a wonderful gift he had, certainly, of being agreeable. No man could read the characters of his guests more correctly, or show greater tact in the choice of such topics as were likely to amuse. He talked well, had travelled much, knew, or affected to know, everybody and everything, from the secret of some French state intrigue that had puzzled all Europe, to the true and veritable particulars of an English divorce case that was destined to be the talk of London during the coming season. Bertie wondered who he could be, but though the Count had led him to speak of himself and his connexions, he had related little of his own history beyond the fact that he was an Italian refugee, banished for political reasons.

After dinner the Count proposed that they should adjourn to his room, and play a quiet game of écarté, for something moderate in the form of stakes. Nothing Bertie would like better. So they lighted their cigars and set out. The Count was loud in his praises of Bertie's skill; declared he was no match for him; and when they separated, about two in the morning, handed him twenty-five pounds, the balance of the stakes, with a courteously expressed hope that he might soon have the pleasure of taking his revenge.

When Bertie woke in the morning he felt on very good terms with himself and the world. He was free from all entanglements, pecuniary and amatory. Certainly, he had lost more than was agreeable at Porchefontaine, but that was a trifle comparatively. All his big debts were paid; his old passion for Celia had quite burnt out; and, like all spoilt favourites of fortune, Bertie flattered himself that all the good things he enjoyed were due rather to his own sound sense, and the power of will with which he shaped his destinies, than to the fact that life was made so pleasant for him that he had only to take it as it

came, and in its enjoyment forget the one who rescued him from its cares.

Some dim feeling of this kind, too slight to cause him any remorse, was yet sufficient to remind him that for months past he had not written to Guy. He had received a letter from Naples some time before, but somehow one thing and another had turned up, and he never had time to answer it.

He would write to Guy that very day, not that he knew exactly what to write about—he was never a brilliant letter-writer—but he could give some sort of account of his doings in Paris. He wouldn't mention the Porchefontaine affair, there was no occasion to bother about that. It was awfully jolly in Paris. So many people that Guy knew—the Domviles, the Hoares—by Jove! a deuced good idea! Why not try to get him to come to Paris? and—yes, of course—bring Celia with him. People had given up talking about that affair long ago. And after all, though it seemed strange at the time, there was nothing so *very* extraordinary in Guy's marrying an actress. Some of the best blood in England—pshaw! He would write at once. Poor old Guy, he *was* a good fellow, and no mistake; he would be so

pleased, too, at being wanted. Then, there was the Count, by-the-bye; such an awfully clever fellow, had travelled so much, and knew such a deuce of a lot. He would just suit Guy; they'd hit it off exactly. Splendid idea, the more he thought of it. Why hadn't it occurred to him before? And so Bertie, in his usual impetuous way, without considering the matter further, dashed off a letter, which was a tolerably exact repetition of the reflections which led to it.

CHAPTER XI.

FAR away from the clamour and bustle of Paris, far away under sweet southern skies, Guy Lawrence lived with his wife.

Amid beautiful surroundings, fair weather, wonderful scenery, their lives seemed the very essence of calm and tranquil happiness.

His only wish seemed to be to get away from the world, and she had said, and said truly, that she was content to go anywhere with him; and as she never complained, never seemed to grow weary of the quietude, never seemed to miss the excitement and admiration and flattery that had once been meat and drink to her, he ceased to trouble himself with the fear that she would be discontented with her new life, and took it for granted that she was, as she said, perfectly happy.

And though she smiled as she said it, and looking up into his face half believed it true, —for how could she help being perfectly happy now she was his wife, now she had

the right to stay with him for ever,—there was a pain in her heart, which would not be stifled, a longing which would not be satisfied. For the calm of her life was on the surface only, and below it, deeply hidden, surged the well-springs of heart-sickness and the weariness of hopes unfulfilled.

Day after day, month after month, she had hoped and hoped in vain, and now despair was beginning to thrust out hope.

She had married Guy Lawrence knowing that he did not love her, but believing that her own great love must win his. Love changed her whole nature. She who was so cold, almost cruel to every one else, loved him so absorbingly that she almost lost her identity. She who had been so violent and impatient, set herself patiently and persistently to win his love. She was beautiful, and he who took such pleasure in beauty would surely grow to take some pride and pleasure in hers. She had at least one talent. She could sing —she would draw out his heart and melt his coldness with her music. She would be always quiet and satisfied, always gentle and cheerful, and he would love her because she was trying to grow good for his sake. But he never seemed to notice her looks, only

asked her to sing out of politeness, and then thanked her in a way that told her how little he had been really listening, and believed so thoroughly that he had done his best to please her, and that she was satisfied and happy, that all her gentle endurance passed unnoticed by him.

But though she was weary of waiting and watching for the love which never came, though she was sick with the sickness of hope deferred, she never complained, and Guy knew nothing of the storm that was swelling beneath the calm, quiet manner. Perhaps it would have been better if he had known some of the trouble that was in her heart, he would have understood her better; and if there had been more confidence between them there might have been more love. But she held her peace, and never cried out, though hope was turning to despair. She had attained the desire of her life. Heart and soul and powerful will she had set on marrying the man whom she loved with an intensity of love almost inconceivable in a woman less violent and passionate than this southern-born beauty. To be always near him, within sight of his face, within sound of his voice, had seemed to her then such

wonderful, almost incredible happiness; but now, in the bitterness of her despair—now, when she was forced to understand that she, with all her gifts could not win the love of her husband, she almost felt that it would have been better to let him go away from her for ever, than to have chosen to be daily and hourly in his presence, tortured by his coldness, maddened by the thought of what happiness might be hers if he loved her.

At first Guy found his married life a very uneasy one. Knowing how little love he had for the woman he had made his wife, bitterly conscious of his own failing towards her, he had sought to atone to her by his anxious assiduity, by his devoted attention and tender courtesy. He had tried to amuse her, to talk to her and entertain her, but these very efforts made him constrained in her presence. There was none of the easy familiarity that exists between married people who love each other, he treated her more as a guest to whom he wished to show every consideration than as his wife, his nearest and dearest. And though Celia said nothing, she fretted and chafed at his manner, and knew too well that his efforts to please

her wanted the true ring of love. They were too conscious, too strained at. His very courtesy galled her, he would never have been so over polite to a woman he loved—better that he should have quarrelled with her, abused her, reproached her, anything, than that he should treat her with this overstrained consideration—like a stranger rather than a wife; she longed for anything to break down this barrier of cold formality that existed between them, anything that should bring her nearer to him and give her an excuse for weeping out all the passion of wounded love that was in her heart.

But she never complained or reproached him—she felt that she had no right, and she feared to grieve him and make him repent his marriage with her—and Guy gradually lost his uneasiness about her: he was very thankful that she at least was happy, that she did not detect any want in him or feel how different he might have been had he loved her, and little by little the constraint he had felt in her presence wore off; it became so natural to him to see her always near him that he even forgot she was there, and would sit for hours almost silent over his painting, so absorbed in thought that he

seemed perfectly oblivious of the woman who was grieving and fretting at his coldness.

Life settled down into a dead calm for Guy Lawrence, the fears which had at first troubled him wore off, the excitement was over, and the reaction had come. Only a long vista of years wherein there could be no hope or prospect of change—a weary future of everlasting sameness stretched out before him. Bound by an indissoluble tie; sworn to eternal fidelity and tenderness to one woman; condemned to crush and smother the love he bore another; oppressed by a sense of duties he could only fulfil in the letter, and not in the spirit; terribly conscious of his own shortcomings, not in deed, but in heart, towards the wife who was so good and loving to him, Guy grew grave and silent, his face wore an habitual look of melancholy, and he seemed suffering from a depression which he could not shake off.

In a large room—that had something of the appearance of an artist's studio, and something of an ordinary sitting-room, with long windows thrown wide open (for though it was winter everywhere else it seemed always summer in this fair Italian land), a

queer, nondescript sort of room, with books tossed carelessly about or piled up everywhere where books could possibly be; with pictures on the walls and pictures on the floor with their faces to the wall; with a grand piano and a litter of music in one corner, and a heterogeneous mass of artist's tools—brushes and paints, and canvas-covered frames, in another—Guy sat one morning painting, and his wife sat a little distance from him, reading, no—not reading, but with a book lying open in her lap, for her eyes were far oftener fixed on his face than on the page before her. It was strange to note the change which a year and a-half had made in this woman—Guy Lawrence's wife. Still beautiful she was, but her beauty was almost of another type than that for which the actress, Estelle, had been so famous. The glorious brilliancy of colour had not faded, but it was no longer the most conspicuous part of her face, the passionate fire of her eyes was quenched, they that had once so vividly flashed scorn and love were drooping now and weariful—and the old imperious haughtiness was subdued. Guy was always painting now, it seemed to be the only occupation in which he had not ceased to take an in-

terest; and Celia, with her book as a shield for her idleness, used to sit watching him, eating out her heart with longing and impatience.

Guy looked up suddenly from his work.

"Celia, will you help me?"

Her face brightened and she sprang eagerly forward at the sound of his voice.

"How can I, Guy?"

"I am in a difficulty about this shadow; will you stand so—no, a little more to the right, with the light on the left side of your face—now bring your head round nearly full—stay, I'll place you."

He got up and began arranging her as he wished her to stand, twisting her about, moving her face to catch the light, in a careless, business-like way; threw back his head, looked at her with the eye of an artist, not of a lover, and returned to his seat with an injunction "not to move."

She obeyed, and though a shadow of disappointment dimmed her eyes, she stood with her head thrown back and her lips parted in a smile, as she had often stood before for the same picture; and Guy became again absorbed in his work, and scanning her closely, striving in vain to rival the peach-like bloom, the warm southern glow of her cheeks,

trying to out-do nature by his art, dwelling with no lingering look of fondness on her brilliant beauty, but wrapt in admiration for its artistic splendour, gazed on her with the piercing scrutiny of a painter who sees in his model only the ideal of his picture, not with the silent rapture of a husband inwardly rejoicing in the object of his love.

The subject of this, his last painting, on which he had spent much time and labour, was a peculiar one.

The scene was the interior of a peasant's cottage—a low-roofed room with rough-hewn rafters, and a small lattice window, a ragged curtain pinned across it. On a low bed, the figure of a girl lying dead. One ray of sunlight piercing through the gloom lights up bright gold glints in the mass of chestnut hair that falls in heavy waves over the white sheet, and glorifies the fair dead face. Through an open door to the right is visible the figure of a woman who is passing—a peasant returning from work with a child perched upon her shoulder. One arm is raised, holding a bunch of grapes over the child's head; her beautiful face is thrown back, and, upturned, catches the full light of the sun; her lips are parted in a smile, her

perfect figure revealed by her simple dress, her short petticoat and laced bodice, and her white bosom only half hidden by the bright coloured handkerchief. A glorious embodiment of life—overflowing, brilliant, animal life; health and strength are depicted in every line of the supple figure and the laughing, radiant face; and beyond in the distance the landscape stretched, shining and golden, and rich-tinted under the burning sun. But the wonder, the strangeness of the picture lay in the contrast between the two figures—one, in the awful hush of death, with a sublime tranquillity on her sweet white face—both so near and yet so unconscious of each other's presence.

Guy Lawrence had called it "Life and Death." All the power, all the talent he possessed he had expended in the working out of this strange imagination. And the effect was so vivid and startling that it was almost terrible.

Life seemed mocking death, and death seemed rebuking life.

If this picture had ever been finished and exhibited, it would have gained for Guy fame as a great artist, for it bore the stamp of a master-hand in the wonderful colouring,

the perfect conception of form, and exquisite tenderness and delicacy of detail. But it was destined never to be finished.

He seemed to have a great love for the beauty his genius had called into life. Day after day he had spent over it, painting with an intentness and patience he had never displayed before.

The girl's face was finished—to the woman's there remained but a few finishing touches to be put, and part of the drapery and the interior of the room was incomplete.

Celia had been his model for the figure of "Life," and though Guy had not intended the face for a likeness, unconsciously the brilliant, glowing, voluptuous beauty had grown into a portrait of his wife.

And the other face, the fair, tender, dead face he had painted from memory.

"Why didn't you tell me you needed me before, Guy?" said Celia, speaking without turning her head or moving her eyes.

"I thought I could get on without you now. You have been a very patient model, but I know it's weary work."

"I am glad if I can be of any good to you, if it is only in this," she answered; "I am so idle—and so useless."

"Useless? No. You embody the beauty, I only try to delineate it," answered Guy, with rather studied politeness. And then there was silence, and he became again absorbed in the perfecting of his work. Suddenly he threw down his brush and his palette, and turned to the window.

"What is it?" asked Celia, changing her attitude for the first time.

"Letters."

That was answer enough: she knew how eagerly Guy looked for letters from home, how week after week he had wearily and vainly waited for tidings of Bertie; and when, after a moment's anxious expectation, a letter was placed in his hand, she saw by the sudden lighting up of his face who it was from, and without a word she took up her book and went back to her seat. From there she watched him as he read, saw the smile that dawned upon his lips; saw him, unconscious of her scrutiny, turn when he had reached the end and glance over it again—heard him stifle a sigh as, folding it up, he put it in his pocket, and, with his arms crossed and his head bent, walked slowly up and down the room deep in thought. She saw the old depression steal gradually over his face again,

the momentary brightening disappear, saw him rouse himself with an effort from his fit of abstraction, and go quietly back to his work. She rose up and went to his side.

"Is Bertie quite well, Guy?"

"Well? Oh, yes, he writes in very good spirits. He is in Paris, enjoying himself wonderfully."

"Doesn't he speak of coming to see you?"

"No; on the contrary, he wants me to go and see him—but that of course is out of the question."

There was a moment's pause. Celia understood the meaning of the sigh she had heard, knew that Guy had not been able to resign the thought of seeing his brother without a sharp pang of regret. Gently, yet persistently, she set herself to learn all the contents of the letter, and then to persuade him to accept the invitation it had conveyed.

"I cannot go, Celia. I could not leave you, and I——"

"You do not want to take me to Paris. I know that, Guy," she returned with a touch of her former pride. "Nothing could induce me to go. It could not be more painful for you to be ashamed of me, than for me to know that you were." Then seeing him

look hurt she suddenly melted. "Oh, Guy, forgive me. I know I am wronging you. I know it is only that you fear to see me pained by the slights your grand friends and relations would throw upon me—and you are right. I am happier here."

"I think you are, Celia, upon my honour I do; but all the same, I would take you anywhere you would like to go."

"But you will go only for a few days to see Bertie; he will be hurt if you do not."

And Celia pleaded and persuaded till Guy, longing to see his brother, yielded.

"Though I can't help feeling it is selfish to leave you, Celia, and I ought to be content to know that Bertie is well and happy without seeing him; and yet," he added to himself, "it *is* a pleasure to know that I shall have a glimpse of him."

The thought of that coming pleasure made Guy's face brighter during the day that preceded his departure than it had been for many a weary month; and Celia, though she had striven so unselfishly to induce him to go, stifled many bitter heart pangs as she noticed the gladness that all her love had not power to call forth.

Looking into her face as the bright sun-

light streamed on it when she stood in the verandah bidding him good-bye, Guy Lawrence noted the shadow that dimmed its brightness, and his eager anticipations were instantly forgotten in self-reproach.

"Celia, you shouldn't have induced me to go. You don't like to be left alone. It is not too late—say one word and I will stay."

Could she only have known how through all future years the remembrance of his words would haunt her and goad her with a frenzy of regret, till, in the insanity of despair, she would reproach herself bitterly, remorsefully, as the cause of the trouble that would have been averted if she had spoken one word, and bid him stay.

But she did not. She only laid her hand lovingly on his shoulder, and said, smilingly, "It seems quite silly to make so much fuss about losing you for one week. How people would laugh at me. Go, mio caro, you will be late."

And Guy, kissing her tenderly, bade her good-bye and turned and left her; but when he had reached the last step and was giving some final direction to his man, he heard her voice calling him, and hurrying back to her found her standing where he had left her.

With a strangely agitated face she laid her arms quietly round his neck.

"Oh, my darling, don't think me foolish—some unaccountable presentiment came over me," and her voice was hushed and tremulous. "Kiss me, Guy, once more. Have I been a good wife to you?" And the tears welled up into her eyes as she looked pleadingly into his.

Guy looked sadly down into the troubled face.

"A good wife to me, Celia? You don't know how your words reproach me. God knows how little I deserve all your goodness." And he pressed her tenderly to him. "Now good-bye again, dear, drive away all silly presentiments and dry up your tears, or your eyes wont have lost their redness before I return." And kissing her again, with a gay smile and farewell wave of the hand, Guy jumped into the carriage and was gone.

CHAPTER XII.

BERTIE DEVERELL was stretched on a sofa in his room, smoking a cigar and reading a novel. He had been for a drive in the Bois, looked in at the Jockey Club for half an hour, and then come home for his siesta before he dressed for dinner.

"Wonder if the fellow who wrote this knows Leoni," he thought, laying down his book to re-light his cigar; "that Jew is meant for him, I'll take my oath. Think I could put him up to a thing or two in the money-lender way—not that he doesn't know—Hullo! come in!"

The door opened, and Guy entered.

"Hullo, Guy! awfully glad you've come, dear old boy, awfully glad!" And he seized his brother's hand and shook it heartily. "So much better than burying yourself alive, as you have lately. What have you

done with Celia? She has come with you?"

"No, I left her behind," replied Guy, warmly returning Bertie's greeting. "She thought it better—besides, I only intend to stay a week."

"A week! nonsense, now I've got you here I don't mean to let you go off so easily. But now let's look at you," placing his hands on his brother's shoulders. "You've lost flesh, Guy; the figs and garlic of the sunny south don't agree with you, *mon frère*, we must put you into condition again before you go."

"Much obliged," answered Guy with a smile. "But how are you, young one? All right again, eh? Dropped late hours and all that?"

"Can't be such a humbug as to say I have altogether, but I'm better, decidedly better; gradually reforming, you know. Never believed in sudden conversions."

"I hope you are better. You couldn't stand the old life, Bertie; another year of it would have killed you. But tell me, who are here?"

"Oh, lots of people you know. Bentham, Leath, the Carringtons, Teddy Berkeley

and his wife—got eight thousand a year with her, you know—and, oh, by-the-bye, the Hoares are here—staying in this hotel."

A slight exclamation escaped Guy. "The Hoares, and—anybody with them?"

"Ah, yes, of course," answered Bertie carelessly, not thinking in his egotism of the real cause of the interest Guy displayed. "Kitty Lorton is with them; but that's all right, we meet as if nothing had happened between us. She's rather stand-offish, certainly; doesn't encourage a fellow to declare himself a second time—not that I've the least idea of doing so, you know, so its rather fortunate than otherwise. But they'll be awfully glad you've come; Clara's always asking me heaps of questions about you."

"I'll look her up to-morrow; but in the meantime, what about dinner? I'm rather hungry. I intended to have put a few figs or a sandwich or two in my pocket."

"Poor old Guy," laughed Bertie; "my 'soles au vin blanc' and my 'faisans aux pointes d'asperges' will be rather wasted on you, I'm afraid."

"Pearls thrown before swine, eh, Bertie? But isn't this rather a feast, or is it my savage tastes that make it appear so?"

"No; you're quite right; I don't usually drink Rousillon at fifteen shillings a bottle —can't afford it, but I shall give you some to-night. Two or three men are coming to dine with me—Bentham, Pearce—you remember Pearce—ah, by-the-bye, yes, and you didn't get on with him very swimmingly the last time you met. Well, you must bury the hatchet to-night."

"Anyone else?"

"Yes, a man you don't know—Count Rosetti, an awfully good fellow, a sort of Admirable Crichton; talks better, dresses better, shoots better, does everything better than any other fellow I know."

"Ah, that's the man you mentioned in your letter."

"Yes, you are sure to like him;" then looking at his watch, "By Jove! only a quarter of an hour to dress—look alive, Guy, we dine at eight."

The dinner passed off successfully: the *ménu* was unexceptionable, the wines went round freely. The Count was, if possible, more brilliant than usual, and made a most favourable impression on Guy, who always appreciated a ready wit and cultured intellect, whether he found them among the

Bohemian coteries of his art acquaintances, or as was infinitely more rare, reflecting a genuine lustre on some highly ranked title.

Pearce was unusually quiet and subdued, and did not seem to hail Guy's appearance with any great delight, but Bentham met him with all his old cordiality. Like most of the men in Bertie's set he had condemned Guy's behaviour in the affair of the marriage without in the least knowing the true facts of the case; but since then the good feeling that undoubtedly existed between the brothers, and the hearty sincerity with which Bertie always spoke of Guy, convinced him that there was another side to the question that the world knew nothing of, and that inexplicable as the whole matter was, Guy Lawrence was guiltless of the dishonourable conduct some imputed to him. Bentham's old liking, his old faith in him returned, and by the warmth of his manner he seemed trying to atone for the injustice he had unwittingly done him.

But the dinner was only the prelude to what was to follow; the real object of the party was play; and Bertie had invited Harvey Pearce and the Count simply and solely that the latter might give him the revenge

he had offered for having relieved Bertie of a rather considerable sum on a previous night. Since the meeting at the bal d'opéra Bertie and the Count had played several times. At first Bertie won, then he had varying fortune, until at last the luck seemed to have set against him, he lost all his original winnings and the Count scored a balance of something like six hundred pounds in his favour. It was to take his "revenge" for these losses that Bertie had arranged the present party.

It was rather awkward, certainly, that Guy should have turned up that night, but it could not be helped—besides, he was not a child in leading strings, and there could be no harm in a game of écarté, though the stakes were somewhat high, between two well matched players. After all he wasn't quite sure that they were so well matched, the Count was no novice, certainly, but then écarté was the game above all others in which he, Bertie, flattered himself he excelled. What luck the Count had had too, but of course it would turn, most likely to-night, and then he would soon wipe off his losings and perhaps stand something to the good.

With the coffee and cigars, by Bertie's

directions, the card-tables were placed. Harvey Pearce preferred to look on, Bentham voted cards a bore, Guy—who concealed a feeling of uneasiness at the sight of these preperations—never played; and so Bertie, who seemed by no means displeased that his écarté would be uninterrupted, seated himself; the Count faced him, and they prepared to play.

"The usual stakes, I suppose?" said the Count, cutting the cards.

"Oh, yes," answered Bertie, looking slightly confused. "Here Guy, have a weed?"

Guy lighted one of the cigars, and sauntered to an easy-chair, which he wheeled to the side of a sofa on which Bentham had stretched himself.

The play began: the luck seemed all one-sided, and it was still against Bertie, who had only scored one game when his opponent had won five. It was not that the hands were unequal, but whenever Bertie held a small card the Count invariably retained a higher one of the same suit with which he made or saved a point.

"You never chuck the wrong one, Count," said Bertie, with a tinge of irritation in his tone, as the Count scored another game.

"One would think you saw through my cards, or over them."

"All luck—simply luck. Your turn presently." And he pencilled a notation in a small morocco and gold betting-book.

"Now, Deverell, go in and win," said Pearce, who was standing behind Bertie's chair. "Do you feel inclined to back your luck, Count?"

"Yes, certainly, for what—a hundred?"

"No, thank you, I can't afford so much as that, unless Deverell likes to go me halves."

"You're wrong to back a losing man," said Bertie, shuffling the cards excitedly. "I can't win a game."

"Something tells me you will win this time. Take fifty of the Count's bet? What do you say?"

"All right then—cut the cards, Count."

"Fifty with each of you, eh?" said the Count, scanning his little book. "Let me see, Deverell, the last game made exactly eight hundred."

Just then Guy happened to turn his head in the direction of the card-players, and the last words, though spoken in rather a low tone, reached his ears, "Eight hundred! Good heavens! Surely Bertie had not lost

so large a sum as eight hundred pounds to this man!" And affecting a nonchalant air he sauntered to the table and took a chair, from which he carelessly looked over the Count's hand. The game went on, Bertie had played his last card but one, the Count had two left; everything depended on which one he played, when Guy, happening to glance at Pearce, saw him put up his hand to his moustache as if to stroke it, while at the same time a rapid look of intelligence passed from him to the Count. Guy started involuntarily. Was it possible that these two were confederates, and Pearce was making pre-arranged signs to the Count? Pshaw! what an absurd suspicion, and yet it was strange, to say the least of it, that the latter should play the right card and reserve the winning one—a heart. Guy shifted his position slightly, to command a view of all the actors in the scene, and without appearing to do so, watched them narrowly.

Two more hands were played, and nothing occurred to confirm his suspicion. Bertie making his score level to the Count's by a persistent run of good cards. The game was now four all. The cards were again dealt, and the Count stood on his hand.

Three tricks had been played and it was now a most critical point of the game; if he scored another trick he would win. Bertie led a diamond—ah! again that gesture—the hand to the moustache—hurriedly too, and unnaturally. The Count threw away the king of spades. Now for Bertie's last card, upon which the game and stakes depended; it was the ten of hearts. The Count played his—it was the knave. Guy no longer had a doubt. To throw away a king and retain a knave was suspicious enough in itself, but that same sign, the hand to the moustache, and the card kept—a heart—the same as the time before.

Bertie looked flushed with a painful excitement. The Count was calmly pencilling his betting book.

"That is eight seventy-five," he said.

Guy rose from the chair and advanced slowly to the table—a stern look was on his face, but he spoke very calmly.

"You may save yourself the trouble of booking those bets—they wont be paid."

That a scene was about to take place everyone saw at once—surprise was depicted on every face except the Count's, and he, though rather pale, lifted his eyebrows and

smiled superciliously. Bertie was the first to speak.

"What the deuce do you mean, Guy?" he cried, starting to his feet, his voice almost choked with passion.

"Simply that you are being swindled. This man," pointing to Pearce, "has been making signs to his confederate here," looking at the Count. "You have been playing with a card-sharper, and he has cheated you."

"You lie!" And with a sudden bound the Count rushed at Guy; but he had met more than his match, for Guy, avoiding the blow with his left hand, seized the Count by the throat, and straining every muscle of his powerful frame, shook him once or twice, and then flung him staggering across the room.

"Don't attempt that sort of thing; I may throw you down stairs. As it is, you will be good enough to walk down—instantly," and Guy pointed to the door.

It would be difficult to describe the consternation caused by Guy's accusation and the result. Bentham had risen from his sofa and advanced towards the group. Pearce was standing at some distance biting his

lips, which were ashy white. Bertie, flushed with anger, was looking from one to the other, too bewildered to speak.

The Count, perfectly livid, but quite self-possessed, drew himself up defiantly.

"You have witnessed this outrage, gentlemen," he said slowly—then with a glance at Guy, "rest assured I shall avenge it." And, lighting a cigarette, he walked calmly out of the room.

Then Pearce, with a show of virtuous indignation, muttering something about expecting an apology, stalked after him.

There was silence for a moment—Bentham shrugged his shoulders, raised his eyebrows, and returned to his sofa, where he complacently blew fresh clouds from his cigar. Bertie, crestfallen at having been duped, but inwardly vowing all sorts of summary vengeance against the Count, stood biting his lips and casting abashed glances at Guy, whose frown relaxed as he turned and spoke.

"You owe that fellow money, Bertie?"

"Yes."

"Of course you wont pay him; he's nothing but a card-sharper, and has won none of it fairly."

"What an infernal scoundrel!" said Ben-

tham; "but I say, old fellow, are you certain you're not mistaken?"

"Perfectly certain. I haven't a doubt about it. You'll find he wont ask for the money, he knows better."

"Perhaps not," said Bertie, savagely, "but I've got a score to settle with him before——"

"Nonsense, nonsense," interrupted Guy, hastily; "he's better left alone; there's an old saying about handling pitch. You've had a narrow escape, young one—don't be taken in again."

"But he talked about avenging himself; if there's anything to be done in that way——"

"Only bluster, nothing else. You must promise me not to take any notice of this fellow—you will promise me, wont you, Bertie?"

"I'll promise you one thing; I wont seek a quarrel with him, but if he goes on with the affair and shows fight, I can't, no, hang it, Guy, even for you, I can't sport the feather."

"Very well, there's no more to be said then. A quarter past twelve: I vote we turn in. Good-night, Bentham;" then in an undertone, "Come to me to-morrow morning. Good-night, Bertie; remember your promise—keep clear of the Count."

CHAPTER XIII.

ABOUT ten o'clock the following day Bentham made his way to Guy's room. He was about to enter, when the door opened and a fiercely-moustached Frenchman came out, saluting him with stately dignity as he passed.

"Who was that fellow?" he asked on entering.

"That was Monsieur de Neuilly, Captain of Chasseurs. He has brought me a challenge from the Count."

"But you wont meet him? you can't go out with a card-sharper!"

"The world doesn't know him as one."

"But you know it," cried Bentham in angry remonstrance. "And as for the world, he's scarcely likely to show in it again."

"There I believe you're wrong," answered Guy. "He would take an opportunity of insulting me publicly, taunt me with bring-

ing a charge that I couldn't prove and hadn't the pluck to resent. I must go out."

"Good God, Lawrence! are you mad? this fellow is a dead shot."

Guy smiled slightly. "You wouldn't have me show the feather on that account."

"But you saw him cheat?"

"Yes, but no one else saw it. I could not prove my charge."

"But you wont meet a fellow you know to be a swindler?"

"Bentham," answered Guy after a moment's pause, "I will tell you the truth. I should refuse, were this quarrel only mine; but if I did he would force Bertie to fight him, for it would be social ruin to him to let this affair pass unnoticed. No, no, better for me to face a hundred deaths than that Bertie should run any risk. I want you to help me in this. I have referred Monsieur de Neuilly to you. You will act for me, wont you."

Bentham looked in Guy's face; he saw a calm resolution there which convinced him that further remonstrance would be useless. "I shall be helping to murder you," he groaned.

"Not a word of all this must reach Bertie if it can be helped. It can do no good to tell

him; he must not be present, and the suspense to him until it is over would be terrible. You will arrange everything for me, I know."

"Yes, Lawrence, but I never served a friend so unwillingly before. Good-bye," and shaking hands with Guy, he left the room.

Guy went out early, leaving a note for Bertie, telling him that he was going to visit some art exhibitions. This was such a common occurrence with Guy that when, in answer to a question from Bertie, Bentham replied evasively that "Guy had not seen anything of the Count," Bertie concluded that nothing more would be heard of the affair of the previous night; that the Count, fearing to brave it out, and knowing how impossible it would be for him to remain in Paris without resenting such an accusation as Guy had brought against him, had gone away to seek fresh fields wherein to turn his talent to account.

Guy, to avoid the telling of an untruth, went to one of the numerous galleries with which Paris abounds. But though he looked at the pictures his thoughts were so full of other things he did not see them, and so, after remaining but a few minutes, he went out

into the crowded streets and roamed about till late in the afternoon, when he knew Bertie would be driving, and then returned to the hotel.

He was ascending the stairs, scarcely heeding what was going on about him, when the sound of descending footsteps made him look up. It was Kitty Lorton, but so sad and pale and worn that even at this moment her changed appearance struck him. Both paused for a moment, staggered by the unexpectedness of the meeting—then Kitty, with a slight curl of her lip, bowed coldly and passed on.

When Guy reached his room and threw himself into a chair a strange chaos of thoughts crowded upon him, racking and bewildering his brain. Was he mad—or was all this some hideous dream? Surely he could not be awake and in his senses. In a few hours he would be in the presence of death; he was no coward, and this it was that made him face the truth boldly. He knew the deadly skill of the man he was going to meet, he knew that in all human probability his aim would be fatal. And this was to be the end—a violent untimely death! After all—was there much to make him cling to life? Was this world so bright and full of happiness to him that

he had cause to regret it? Would not death come almost as a friend to cut the gordian knot of all his troubles, to relieve him from the never ceasing effort of simulating a love he could not feel, to put an end to the bitter anguish of vain regrets for the irrevocable past. Was not life made of such trials? "The gods conceal the happiness of death, that we may endure life." Was there not truth in this thought? And yet, what might have been. That one dear face that had brightened his path in days gone by, had she been his how different would his life have been. But he had sacrificed his love and hers (a groan of anguish escaped him at the recollection) for one who had not been worthy of her, to whom she was now as nothing—her life sacrificed and his own, uselessly, to that vow by his mother's death-bed, that vow that he had loyally kept in spite of all the ruin it had wrought. Had he done right, sternly, relentlessly, with the unyielding force of his iron will to sacrifice all others to his brother's welfare? That wan, pale face that he had just seen rose before him, silently condemning him for the wrong he had done her in his blindness, humiliating him, wounding him more deeply than the bitterest words

by its contemptuous, scornful haughtiness. He knew she had loved him once, and though she had since declared that her love had passed away, incapable as he was of egotism, he felt that her careworn face was the outward sign of a barren life, of the canker-worm of a blighted love, a love that he had held dearer than all else in the world, but had uselessly sacrificed in his blind determination to be loyal to his vow.

Rising from his chair he walked to the dressing-table, and unlocking a travelling-bag which lay there drew forth a small ivory miniature case. It contained the portrait of Kitty Lorton and a few withered blossoms—the souvenir of some bright, well-remembered hour gone by. For a moment he gazed at the withered dried-up leaves; then, with a sob that shook his whole frame, he bent over the fire and scattered them on the flames.

A tap at the door. Who could it be? It was a waiter with a letter. Guy took it, and a sharp pang seized him as he cast his eye on the writing. It was from Celia, his wife. He tore it open, and as he read it, each word that breathed the love so true and noble, of her he had well-nigh forgotten in his grief, sunk into his soul, stinging him

with remorse, until his head dropped on his hands, and he groaned aloud in his anguish, "Another life wrecked. Another love wasted. Oh God, forgive me the wrong I have done."

The meeting was arranged to take place at six o'clock on the following morning at the seat of Lord Wyldoates, a young English nobleman who, amongst other idiosyncrasies by which he became notorious, was in the habit of granting the use of his grounds for hostile meetings.

It was a cold, cheerless morning. Heavy rolling leaden-hued clouds obscured the sky, and a drizzling rain was falling. Guy and Bentham reached —— in a fiacre, punctually at six, at the same moment as a well-appointed brougham, from which the Count, De Neuilly, and another Frenchman—who proved to be M. Granard, a military surgeon —alighted. The two parties saluted courteously, with the customary punctiliousness of men who are about to gratify a longing for each other's blood.

They were received at the lodge by a highly-respectable looking personage attired in black, with a white cravat. This was Lord Wyldoates' steward, who at once led them to an open space smoothly turfed and

surrounded by trees, which, he remarked, was a very favourite spot for these little affairs. He regretted that messieurs had such unfavourable weather.

While the preliminaries were being arranged by the seconds, Guy looked at his adversary. The Count was dressed all in black: a tightly-fitting frock coat buttoned high and a satin scarf completely hid his shirt-front, so that no conspicuous spot that might have served as a mark was to be seen. He was lounging carelessly on a rustic seat, calmly smoking a cigarette. Not a trace of agitation was in his manner or appearance, his face bore a look of ennui rather than of any other feeling. The conditions of the duel were soon arranged. De Neuilly, who had assisted at such meetings so often that he could scarcely feel interested in the proceedings, suggested that three shots should be allowed. To this Bentham objected. At last it was arranged that the combatants were to fire simultaneously, at fourteen paces, at the dropping of a handkerchief; a second shot to be allowed only if no blood were drawn in the exchange.

"Restez là, m'sieu, s'il vous plaît," and De Neuilly pointed to a spot which he had marked by a pebble. Guy took his position

and Bentham gave him his pistol, which he took in his left hand. He was slightly pale, but it was not the pallor of fear; the calm expression of his face was that of a man who knew he was meeting death, and met it bravely. The seconds withdrew, the Count and Guy faced each other. How terribly short the space that divided them appeared! De Neuilly was about to give the signal, when a loud, excited shout stopped him. The next moment Bertie Deverell, breathless, and almost maddened with excitement, rushed up.

"What is this? Oh, God! what is this? Guy, Guy, what would you have done? Bentham, why don't you take him away? Would you help to murder him?" And he looked in a wild, frenzied manner from one to another.

The Count lifted his eyebrows, De Neuilly shrugged his shoulders, while Bentham, silenced by Bertie's anguish, stood looking at Guy.

"Are you all mad? This shall not go on, I say!" Then turning to De Neuilly and the Count, "I tell you it would be murder, cold-blooded murder! Oh, God! Why doesn't some one speak! Guy, Guy, come away! you must, you shall!"

There was a dead silence for a moment. Then Guy spoke in a tremulous voice, "Bertie, you will make a child of me. It is a terrible trial for you, young one, but for my sake face it bravely."

"Stand by calmly and see you slaughtered?"

"This *must* go on."

"It *shall* not! It was my quarrel, not yours! Even you would not murder a defenceless man, I presume?"—and he turned to the Count—"I tell you he cannot use his right arm. Let me take his place." His voice was hoarse with the passion that possessed him. He knew that a duel was inevitable, and in the madness of his despair thought only of saving Guy. "It was my quarrel! If you are not a coward you will fight me!" The Count smiled ironically.

"Another day, m'sieu—with pleasure: at present I am engaged with your brother."

"He shall not fight you. You think, scoundrel that you are——"

Guy advanced and laid his hand on Bertie. "Hush, nothing can stop this. I swear it."

A deep groan escaped Bertie: he knew then that further remonstrance was useless.

"Oh, Guy! oh, Guy!" And in an agony of grief he wrung his brother's hand.

"God bless you, Bertie. I am ready, m'sieu." And Guy resumed his position.

Bertie kept his eyes fixed on him, impelled by some irresistible fascination. De Neuilly held out a white handkerchief. "Etes vous prêt, messieurs?" A moment's pause, that seemed an age—the handkerchief fell, and simultaneously the report of the two pistols sounded.

The Count was untouched, the shot had passed wide above him; but his fire, delivered with deadly aim, had reached its mark. On his back, motionless, lay Guy Lawrence on the soddened grass, a small stream of blood welling from a wound in his right side. With a cry Bertie sprang forward, followed by the surgeon, and bent over him, one holding up his head, the other tearing open his clothes seeking for his wound.

"Is he killed?" moaned Bertie, in a husky voice.

"Non—il vive encore."

Presently the wounded man's eyes opened slowly; then as they rested on Bertie he muttered with an effort, "Take me back—at once—no time."

Bertie looked at the doctor.

"Can he be moved?"

"Yees, yees, I tink so—de wound not seem vare bad."

At this moment the Count, carefully drawing on his gloves and smoking a freshly-lit cigarette, sauntered up.

"Have I not killed him, Granard?" he asked carelessly; "mon Dieu! I can't comprehend, I certainly intended to."

Bertie turned with a cry, and would have sprung at him but for Bentham, who restrained him. Then the Count, lifting his hat, without bestowing another look upon the havoc he had done, turned on his heel and left the ground with De Neuilly.

By this time the fiacre had been brought to the spot where Guy lay, and he was carefully lifted into it. He remained in a stupor from which they did not attempt to rouse him the whole of the way back to the hotel.

"Why did you not tell me of this, Bentham?" asked Bertie, reproachfully.

"Couldn't, you know: he made me promise not. How did you find it out?"

"By the merest accident. I had been somewhere with Leath and one or two other fellows—didn't get home till half-past five. Just before I reached the Grand I saw a

fiacre drive away. Thinking it early for a departure I asked the porter who were in it. 'Messieurs Lawrence et Bentham,' said he. Lawrence and Bentham! I wondered what could take you both at such a time. Then suddenly the truth flashed upon me. I jumped into another fiacre and drove the way you had gone, but we soon lost all trace of you. At last it occurred to me that the porter might have heard where you told the man to go. Cursing my stupidity in not thinking of that before, I drove back. 'Oh, yes, M. Lawrence had told him to go to——: it was not far, my man knew it.' Away I came as hard as the horse could gallop—oh, the agony of that drive! and reached you to see—— Take care; rest his head on my shoulder. So; that's better."

In a few minutes they were at the Grand. Despatching one messenger for a well-known English surgeon resident in Paris, and another for a nurse, Bertie and Bentham themselves carried him carefully and noiselessly upstairs, and laying him on his bed, waited by his side, in terrible suspense and anxiety for the arrival of the doctor, whose verdict would be of life or of death for Guy Lawrence.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN hour later the English surgeon, one far-famed for his knowledge and skill, came softly out of the room where Guy Lawrence lay. Bertie followed him with ashen face and quivering lips, that would not frame the question he tried to ask.

"It's no use," said the doctor gravely and quietly, yet turning away his eyes as if he feared to see the suffering his words must cause. "There is internal bleeding. You can seek other advice if you please, but nothing can be done for him. It is all over with him, poor fellow."

"No use. Oh, God! then *I* have killed him. Doctor, try and save him, for the love of heaven, try and save him."

"Hush!" said the other, quietly disengaging himself from Bertie's frantic grasp, and pointing to the door; "pray calm yourself; any excitement may hasten the end."

The end! Had it come to that?—the end?

Had God sent this awful vengeance upon him? Had this blackness of despair fallen upon him indeed? Was there no ray of light—no hope of mercy? Faint with horror Bertie leant against the wall, and the doctor stood apart, unwilling to leave him, yet powerless in the presence of a suffering that his skill could not alleviate.

As they stood so, both became conscious of a small white face with dilated eyes, gazing at them with speechless dread. Kitty Lorton, an earlier riser than any of the other visitors at the hotel, coming quietly down the stairs, had heard voices in the passage, and, waiting for the speakers to pass on, had overheard the last sentences.

The doctor rallied his thoughts; he was struck by the terror in the girl's face, and began to fear some fresh scene. "Some relation," he thought; "sister, perhaps." Then he said aloud, "My dear young lady, do not wait here. A gentleman has met with an accident, and——"

She shook him off, and turned to Bertie. "Bertie, who is it?" she gasped. "Not—not——"

"Yes—Guy," answered Bertie, through his closed teeth, staring at her fiercely with

haggard, bloodshot eyes; "he's dying—I've killed him. Go away—why do *you* come here?"

But she did not hear him. She seemed for a moment absolutely numbed with horror. Her breath came quick and short. She tried to speak, but the words died on her parched, white lips. "Is he there?" she said at last in a hoarse whisper, stretching out her hand towards the door. Bertie pushed her almost roughly aside.

"You can't go in. What do you want there? He can't be disturbed This is no place for you. Haven't you heard he's dying—*dying!*" he repeated, half mad with despair.

She seemed as if she would have made her way in, in spite of him. In this moment of overpowering emotion all minor thoughts, all worldly restraints, were utterly swept away. She only knew that Guy was there—Guy was dying, and she must go to him; and when she found that she was stopped, she turned on Bertie with piteous pleadings.

"I must go to him; oh! Bertie, let me, let me: you cannot keep me from him. Oh! Bertie, he loved me, and I love him so. Let me go to him."

The words that she would have died

rather than have uttered an hour ago came so naturally to her then. Bertie's face softened as they brought to his remembrance a confession that Guy had made to him long ago, and he spoke more quietly than he had done before.

"You must not go in; the doctor says that—Hush!"

The door of the room was opened very gently, and a woman in the dress of a sœur de charité beckoned to him, and laid her finger on her lips. Bertie, ghastly white, went hastily in, the doctor followed, and Kitty, utterly forgotten, crept tremblingly in behind them. The bright morning light streamed into the room, and fell on the bed, and on the man who lay there, wounded unto death.

Ay, death was coming—coming fast; he had set his seal on the drawn, sharpened features, had damped the crisp brown hair with heavy dews, had robbed the powerful form of all its strength. Ay, death was coming even while they watched him, and the girl who loved him looked at him, and knew it. A sickening shiver, a deadly faintness, crept over her, but, with a terrible effort of will, she forced herself

back to consciousness, and stood motionless in the shadow by the door. He turned his head as Bertie approached him, and his eyes, wide opened and fully conscious—those fearless, honest eyes that not even death could dim—rested with a wistful tenderness on his young brother, and he tried to stretch out one feeble hand towards him.

"Bertie, dear boy," he said, faintly, "stay with me now; don't leave me any more."

Bertie, shaking as in an ague, tried in vain to overcome his emotion. The sight of it seemed to distress Guy.

"Don't grieve, young one, don't grieve for me. It's—it's not so hard to die."

With one great gasping sob, Bertie threw himself down by the bedside, and gave himself up to uncontrolled grief.

"Oh, Guy, you must not die—you cannot die! Oh, Guy, I have killed you! I have killed you—it was for me you went out. I am your murderer!"

Guy tried to raise himself—tried in vain to speak; but his dying lips refused to articulate, and he sank back with a low groan, insensible.

Paralysed by the sight of what he had done, Bertie looked wildly round for help;

but the doctor and nurse, obedient to a sign from the dying man, had left the room, and only Kitty stood there, hiding by the door. She never knew whether they had passed her unnoticed, or out of pity had let her stay; but there she remained, trembling and quivering in silent agony. As Guy fell back, she started forward with a low cry, and snatching up a glass that stood on a small table by his side, she raised his head and held it to his white lips. He did not move; he could not drink. Oh, God! was he dying even then? She bent her head and pressed her lips to his forehead. She called him by his name.

"Guy, Guy! dear Guy, hear me! Oh, God, make him hear me!"

As if her voice could recall him even from death, he opened his eyes and fixed them unconsciously on her.

"Try and drink, it will revive you—only one mouthful, Guy, dear Guy——"

Again her voice seemed to rouse him. The unconscious state changed to a petrified awe-struck gaze. Did it seem to his wandering senses as if she in a vision had appeared to his dying eyes, watching over him? Obeying her, as by an instinct, he

tried to swallow a few drops of the brandy, and it seemed instantly to revive him. As she put down the glass his eyes followed her, he looked at her and knew her—knew that it was no vision.

Such a strange bright smile spread over his face—such a quiet, satisfied look of supreme happiness! For a moment love reigned triumphant over death, and chased away its ghastly horror.

"Kitty, dear Kitty," he said in a whisper, such a feeble whisper—she bending her head close to his, could only catch the struggling, gasping words—"I'm so thankful you have come—I want to tell you—you will believe me now—I did love you, always."

She could not answer him. She could not speak and control her voice.

"It wasn't your fault," he said, with a faint, tender smile, "that you couldn't love me. You mustn't grieve yourself."

"Not love you—not love you? Oh, Guy, Guy! God knows I loved you with all my heart! God knows I would die for you now. Oh, Guy! my love, my love—take me with you!"

A look of unutterable joy spread over his face. He laid his hand on hers.

"Is it true? Oh, my darling—if it's true, kiss me once before I go."

She knelt by his side, and, putting her arms round him, pressed her warm soft lips to his, cold and damp with the dews of death, in a long, lingering kiss, that seemed as if by its passionate love it would draw him back to life. She smoothed back the hair from his forehead; she caressed his drooping nerveless hands; but he could not see her or heed her any more. He seemed to have sunk into a sort of heavy stupor, his eyes grew glazed and dim. Once he seemed to rouse himself, and she, laying her head close to his, tried to catch the feeble whisper.

"Hold—my—hand: let—me—die—so."

And she, with his hand fast locked in hers, knelt by his side and watched. She knew that death must come soon. She never moved her eyes from his face; she heard people come into the room; she heard whispering voices by the door and Bertie's despairing sobs, but she neither moved nor faltered. White and cold and motionless, she knelt and watched for death.

A stir, a whisper — "the change is coming." Yes. No need to tell her; she sees it, the strange grey pallor stealing over

the drawn features. The sobs cease. Bertie staggers to his feet, and she, rising, puts her arm beneath the dying head, and holds him so, as if to aid the gasping struggle for the breath that will not come. Ay, the change is coming very, very fast; the terrible change from life to death. Once more the dim eyes open, the feeble hands grope blindly in the terrible, swift-coming darkness.

"Guy, my darling, my love, I am here, holding you. I am with you."

"Kitty!—forgive—all—Bertie—Bertie."

And so he died, with his brother's name on his lips—faithful even unto death.

Over the dead form of Guy Lawrence there was much bitter wailing — many agonized cries.

One woman, in the extremity of mortal grief, with frenzied ravings and passionate cries of terrible despair—with all the fury of a violent nature rebelling against a resistless fate—beat herself vainly and hopelessly against the rock which had wrecked her hopes; and in her madness seemed as if she would curse God and die. But on the other, the girl who had held him dying

in her arms, there had fallen a great calm.

To her it seemed as if she had gained her lover rather than lost him. Only in that hour of death had she confessed her love and believed in his. Death could not rob her of him more than life had done. Living, he was another woman's husband; dead, he was hers, and hers alone.

The supreme joy of her life and the supreme agony had met in one hour, and passing over her, had left her in a trance-like stupor, in which death seemed a greater reality than life.

Thought of herself, sorrow for herself, intense grief—all seemed hushed in the presence of the sublime tranquillity, the awful calm of death.

How she envied him—how she longed to share that unutterable peace, that perfect rest, which had shed an almost divine light on the white, still face! Would she break it if she could? If cries and tears and piteous pleadings could bring him back to life, would she not smother them back into her own heart rather than break the rest which had come to him after long suffering?

Truly, life had not been so sweet to Guy Lawrence that he had cared much to lose it: it had been to him one long struggle; an unending series of sacrifices to an idea of duty, which he had consummated by this last great sacrifice of all—his life. Mistaken he might have been; blind to the expediency which would have made other men consider whether it was wise or right to sacrifice himself and even others, in a desperate adherence to one duty, one vow.

Ay, mistaken he may have been, even as that Roman soldier, of old story, was mistaken, and would not see the expediency of flight even though the fire might consume him; unwise in the wisdom of this world, yet sublime in his heroism; and in his unselfish devotion, a man to be admired, not pitied.

There is a grave at Père-la-Chaise, a splendid marble monument, that bears Guy Lawrence's name, and the date of his death —erected by his widow and his only brother and heir.

For many months there were three constant visitors to that grave: two women, who brought delicate, costly flowers, and

laid them lovingly on the white stone (and who always came at different times, and seemed to avoid each other); and the third, a young man, yet prematurely aged as by some terrible sorrow, who would sit for hours there in moody solitude. But little more than a year had passed when two of those mourners ceased to come, and only one remained constant in her visits to the dead. One restless, passionate heart,—which had been for a brief while filled with love,—when love and hope were dead, turned again to ambition; and in the glory of a triumphant début on an Italian stage, Estelle, the actress, tried to forget the sorrows of Celia, the widow. And Bertie Deverell, shunning old haunts and old associates, left Paris after a while, and, giving up all his old extravagant ways, never rested until he had rebuilt Erlesmere and restored it to more than its former beauty, as if he would thereby repair some at least of the wrong he had done; and though after many years new faces came there, and children's voices echoed through the old gardens where he and Guy had played long ago, the shadow of a great sorrow never left Bertie Deverell's face—the remembrance of one

who had given up all for him never left his heart.

Who shall say, seeing the altered life of the brother whom he loved so well, that Guy Lawrence's sacrifices were in vain?

But one remained near to that foreign grave; Kitty Lorton, unfettered by the necessity to earn her living, free from all fear of want—through a legacy left to her in Guy Lawrence's will—never went far from it, never discontinued her visits to it through the remainder of her life, though that life lasted many years, and seemed to her a long and weary waiting.

Time had robbed both face and form of all youthful beauty; and the eyes that looked down on the cold marble were dim and heavy, the limbs that bore her day by day to his grave were weak and failing before death came and took her where her lover had gone before—took her to everlasting rest.

THE END.